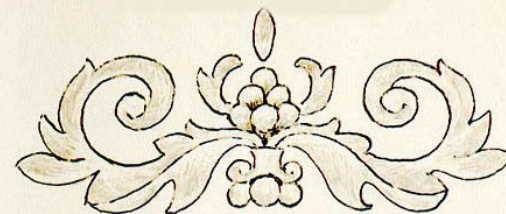


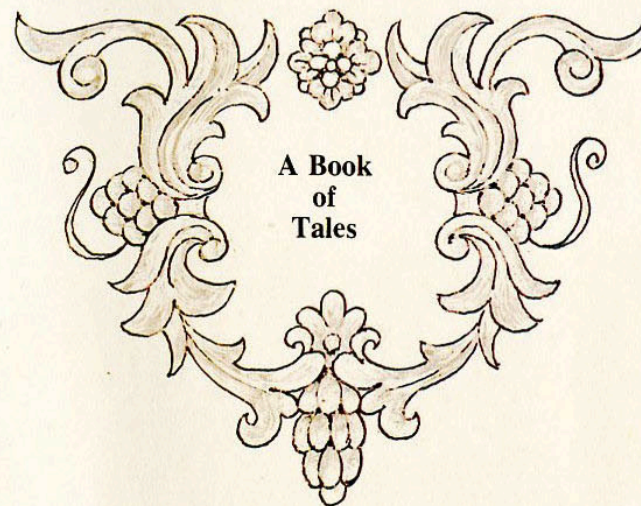
ON SEASHORE FAR  
A GREEN OAK TOWERS

A Book  
of  
Tales





# ON SEASHORE FAR A GREEN OAK TOWERS



A Book  
of  
Tales



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MOSCOW

Rs. 7.50

Translated from the Russian  
Drawings by Oleg Korovin

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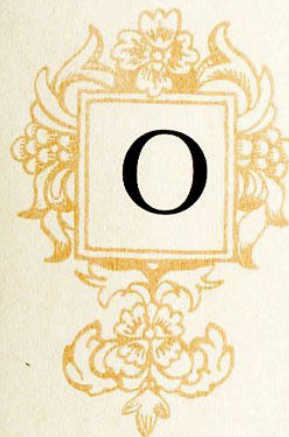
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*Alexander Pushkin*

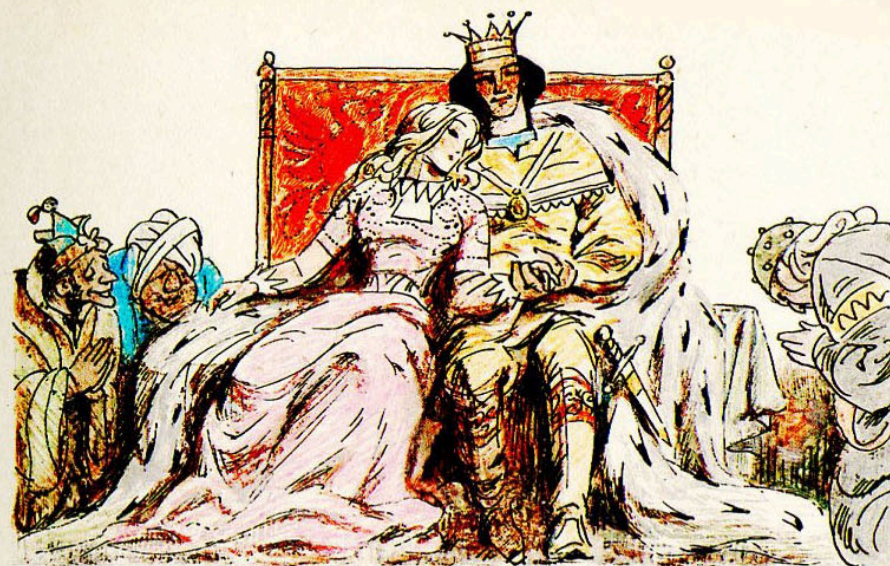
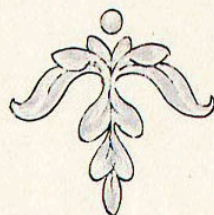
\* \* \*



On seashore far a green oak towers,  
And to it with a gold chain bound,  
A learned cat whiles away the hours  
By walking slowly round and round.  
To right he walks, and sings a ditty;  
To left he walks, and tells a tale...

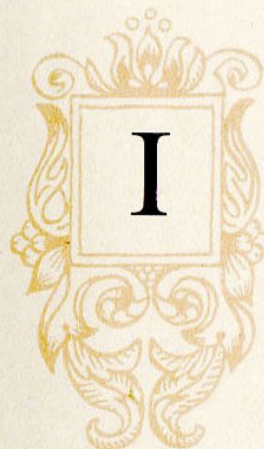
A strange place! There a mermaid sits in  
A tree; there prowls a sprite; on trails  
Unknown to man move beasts unseen by  
His eyes; there stands on chicken feet,

Without a door or e'en a window,  
 A tiny hut, a hag's retreat.  
 Both wood and valley there are teeming  
 With wondrous things... When dawn comes, gleaming  
 Waves o'er the sands and grasses creep,  
 And from the clear and shining water  
 Step thirty goodly knights escorted  
 By their old tutor, of the deep  
 An ancient dweller... There a dreaded  
 Tsar by a prince is captive ta'en;  
 There, as all watch, for cloud banks headed,  
 Across the sea and o'er the plain,  
 A mage a warrior bears. There, weeping,  
 A young princess sits in a cell,  
 And Grey Wolf serves her very well.  
 There, in a mortar, onward sweeping  
 All of itself, beneath the skies  
 The wicked Baba-Yaga flies;  
 There Tsar Koshchei o'er his hoard withers...  
 A smell of Russ! Of Russ all breathes there!...  
 There once was I, and the learned cat,  
 As near him 'neath the oak I sat  
 And drank of sweet mead at my leisure,  
 Told me full many a tale... With pleasure  
 These tales of his do I recall  
 And here and now will share with all...



*Sergei Aksakov*

## THE LITTLE SCARLET FLOWER



In a certain realm, in a certain land, there lived a wealthy merchant, a man of great means.

Much wealth had he of every kind—gold and silver treasure, pearls and precious stones, costly wares from far-off lands. And this merchant had three daughters, each more lovely than words can tell, but the youngest was the fairest of all. He loved his daughters more than his entire fortune—more than his pearls and

precious stones, more than his gold and silver treasure. His love was great, for his wife was dead and he had nobody else to love. Though he loved his elder daughters, he loved his youngest daughter best because she was the kindest and most loving to her father.

One day, this merchant made ready to sail across the sea with his wares, to the ends of the earth. Before departing, he said to his dear daughters,

"O my kind and sweet and tender daughters, I take my ships to trade in lands across the sea. Whether I be long on my way I cannot say, but I bid you live in virtue and peace while I am gone. Then I shall bring you back whatever gifts your hearts desire. And I give you three days to make your choice; then you shall tell me what gifts you desire."

For three days and nights they considered, then came to their father and told him of the gifts they each desired. The first daughter bowed low to her father, and spoke thus,

"Sire, my dear beloved father, bring me no gold or silver brocade, no black sable, no wondrous pearls. Bring me, I pray thee, a golden crown set with precious stones, such that shines as the full moon or the bright sun, such that turns the dark of night into the light of day."

The honest merchant thought awhile, then said,

"So be it, daughter mine, I shall bring you just such a crown. I know a man across the sea who can get it for me. It belongs to a foreign princess and is concealed in a stone chamber buried deep in a mountain of stone, seven yards down behind three iron doors with three German locks. The task is not an easy one, but my fortune knows no bounds."

Next, his second daughter bowed low and said,

"Sire, my dear beloved father, I want no gold or silver brocade, no black Siberian sable, no wondrous pearl necklace, no golden crown with precious stones. Bring me a mirror of Eastern crystal, so pure and perfect I may behold all the beauty under the sun, such that when I look into it I may never grow old, my maidenly beauty shall increase."

The honest merchant became thoughtful; then he said,

"So be it, daughter mine, I shall bring you a crystal mirror such as you describe. There is just such a mirror belonging to the daughter of the King of Persia, a young princess whose beauty no tongue can describe, no pen can depict, no mind can imagine. The mirror is hidden in a stone tower, tall and strong, that stands on a mountain cliff seven hundred yards high. And the mirror is kept behind seven iron doors with seven German locks. Three thousand steps lead up to the tower and on every step stands a Persian warrior guarding the treasure day and night, each wielding a mighty sword of sharp steel. And the keys to those iron doors hang on a belt around the princess's waist. But I know a man across the sea who can get me that mirror. This task is harder than your sister's, but nothing is beyond my fortune."

Then the youngest daughter bowed low to her father and spoke thus,

"Sire, my dear beloved father, I want no gold or silver brocade, no black Siberian sable, no wondrous necklace, no bejewelled crown, no crystal mirror. Bring me, I pray, the Little Scarlet Flower, the most beautiful thing in the whole wide world."

The honest merchant pondered even harder than before. How long it took him, I cannot tell, but finally he made up his mind. He kissed his beloved youngest daughter, and thus he spoke,

"Well, you have set me a task harder than your sisters. When a person knows what to seek, he may surely find it; but how can he find that which he knows not? Red flowers are not hard to find, but how am I to know which is the most beautiful in the whole wide world? I shall do my best, but be not angry if I cannot please you."

Despatching his good and kind daughters to their maidenly bedchambers, he began to prepare for his voyage to a distant realm across the seas. Whether he was long making ready I cannot say—it is quicker to tell the tale than do the deed—but eventually he departed on his voyage.

He arrived in foreign parts, traded in unknown realms, sold his wares at thrice their value and bought others at three times less. He bartered ware for ware, and received gold and silver into the

bargain, then loaded his ships with gold coin and sent them home. He obtained the cherished gift for his eldest daughter, the golden crown set with precious stones that turn the dark of night into the light of day. And he found the cherished gift for his second daughter, the crystal mirror which reflects all the beauty under the sun, which is such that she who looks into it never grows old, but grows ever younger. Yet nowhere could he find the cherished gift for his youngest and dearest daughter, the Little Scarlet Flower whose beauty is greater than anything in the whole wide world.

In the gardens of tsars and kings and sultans he came upon many red flowers of greater beauty than tales can tell or words can relate. But no one could assure him that a particular flower was the most beautiful in the world. Nor was he sure himself. As he journeyed on his way with his loyal servants, over shifting sands and through dense forests, he was suddenly set upon by robbers, infidels they were, Turks and Indians and suchlike. In the face of such adversity, the honest merchant left behind his rich caravans and loyal servants and fled into the dark forests.

"Better that wild beasts should tear me asunder," thought he, "than that I should fall into the hands of heathen robbers and spend the rest of my days as their captive slave."

So he wandered through the dense, nigh impassable forest; and the farther he went, the easier the going became, for the trees and the thick bushes seemed to part to make way for him. Yet when he looked back, he could not stretch forth his hand; he looked to the right, and the undergrowth was so thick that a cross-eyed hare could not have passed; he looked to the left, and that was even worse. The honest merchant was astonished: he could not understand the marvel that was befalling him. He walked on and on along the beaten track that appeared beneath his feet. From dawn to dusk he walked, never hearing a wild beast roar, a snake hiss, an owl hoot or a bird sing. A deathly silence lay all about him. And then dark night descended making it pitch black all around except for a patch of light beneath his feet. On he walked till midnight and he began to see some kind of glow before him, and he thought,



"The forest must be on fire. Why am I heading for a certain death?"

He tried to retrace his steps, but he could not move; all around, the forest closed in on him. The only way was forward, along the beaten track.

"If that be so," he thought, "I'll stay where I am and the glow may go away, pass me by or even go out altogether."

So he stood still and waited. But the glow seemed to come straight towards him lighting up the forest all around. He thought and thought and resigned himself to moving forward: "A man can only die once," he thought to himself. So the merchant made the sign of the cross and moved on. The farther he went, the brighter grew the light until it was as clear as day. Yet he heard no noise or crackling of a fire. At last he emerged into a wide clearing—and there in the centre a fantastic sight met his gaze: neither house nor mansion, but a magnificent palace, royal or imperial, shining with the light of silver and gold and precious stones. It blazed and glittered, yet there was no fire to be seen. It was like staring into the brilliant sun, it hurt his eyes to look at it. All the windows of the palace were thrown open and from within came sweet music, such as the merchant had never heard before.

Entering the great courtyard through grand open portals, he followed a path of white marble, past fountains, great and small, spouting on either side of the path. He entered the palace by a staircase carpeted with crimson cloth and with gilded banisters. Venturing into first one hall, then a second, and a third, he found no one there, then he entered a fifth hall, and a tenth, and still there was no one. Yet everywhere his gaze met furnishings for a king, such as he had never beheld—gold and silver, Eastern crystal, ivory of elephant and mammoth.

The honest merchant marvelled at such untold wealth and marvelled even more that there was no master or servants to be seen. Yet the air was filled with music. And then the merchant said to himself, "This finery is all very well, but there is nothing to eat."

No sooner had he spoken than a table appeared before his eyes, richly decked with gold and silver vessels containing delicious

sweetmeats, foreign wines and meads. He sat at the table without delay, ate and drank his fill, for he had eaten nothing for a whole day. The food was more delicious than words can tell, tempting enough to make a man swallow his tongue. After his long journey through the forest and over the sand, he was famished. On finishing his meal, he rose from the table, but there was no one to thank for the hospitality, no one to whom he might bow in gratitude. Hardly had he risen and looked around than the table and all upon it vanished, as if it had never been. Meanwhile, the music played on without a pause. The honest merchant was filled with wonder at these marvels and miracles; and as he walked through the noble chambers, he thought to himself,

"How pleasant it would be to lie down and have some sleep."

And lo! Before him stood a carved bed of pure gold, on crystal feet, with a canopy of silver fringed with tassels set with pearls; and a mattress as tall as a hill lay upon it, made of soft swansdown.

This new and wondrous miracle filled the merchant with even greater awe. But he lay down upon the high bed, and drew the canopy over him finding it as soft and fine as silk. It grew dark in the chamber, as at twilight, and the music seemed to fade into the distance. And he thought, "If only I could see my daughters, even in my dreams!"

And at that very moment he fell asleep.

When the merchant awoke, the sun was already high above the tallest tree, and he could not at first remember where he was. All night he had dreamed of his daughters, so good and kind and lovely; and he saw in his dream that his two eldest daughters, the oldest and the second-born, were merry and gay, while only his favourite, the youngest daughter, was sad. He saw that his eldest daughters had rich suitors whom they were to wed even without their father's blessing. But the youngest daughter, the fairest and dearest, would not hear of suitors until her dear father had returned home. Thus his heart was filled at once with joy and sorrow.

When he rose from his high bed, he found garments set out ready for him, and a fountain of water showered into a crystal bowl.

He washed and dressed and marvelled no more at each new miracle: tea and coffee stood on a table next to a tray of sweetmeats. Having said grace, he ate his fill, then set out once more to explore the palace, to gaze up on its beauty in the golden sunshine; and all seemed to him more lovely than the day before. Through the open windows he could see wondrous gardens full of fruit and flowers of untold beauty. He longed to walk in those gardens.

Leaving the palace by another staircase, this one of green marble and copper malachite with gilded banisters, he descended straight into the verdant gardens. And there he walked and admired the trees covered in fruit ripe and red, just asking to be eaten, so tempting they made his mouth water. And beautiful flowers blossomed, full and fragrant and bright with every colour. Strange birds flitted about, like gold and silver displayed on green and crimson velvet, singing heavenly music. Fountains of water spouted so high a man had to throw back his head to see their tops, and clear springs ran bustling and babbling through crystal channels.

The honest merchant walked in awe, his eyes racing to and fro to take in all these marvels—and he knew not where to look or what to listen to. Whether he wandered long in this way I cannot say; it is quicker to tell the tale than do the deed. But, all of a sudden, he saw on a grassy mound a flower of scarlet hue; its beauty was more than words can tell or a pen depict. The honest merchant's heart missed a beat; he drew near to the flower, and he felt its perfume fill the air throughout the garden, like a fragrant stream. And his hands and legs trembled as he cried out joyfully,

"This is the Little Scarlet Flower whose beauty is greater than anything in the world, that my beloved youngest daughter asked me to bring!"

With these words, he approached and plucked the Little Scarlet Flower. That same moment, with no black warning cloud, lightning flashed and thunder rolled till the earth shook beneath his feet. And there appeared before the merchant, as from the ground, a creature that was neither beast nor man, a monster covered in hair and terrible to behold. And the monster roared in a savage voice,

"What hast thou done? How darest thou pluck my favourite flower, the sacred flower of my garden? I tended and cherished it more than the apple of my eye, and it was my pleasure every day to behold it. Now thou hast taken all the pleasure out of my life. I am the lord of this palace and garden; I welcomed thee as a guest, dear and honoured; I gave thee food and drink and rest. Is this how thou repayest my goodness? Learn then thy bitter fate: for thy crime thou wilt die before thy time!"

And a great chorus of savage voices took up the cry,  
"For thy crime thou wilt die before thy time!"

The honest merchant's teeth clattered from fright. He looked round and saw on every side, from under every bush and tree, from the water and the ground, a host of evil spirits, all hideous monsters, were crawling towards him. Falling on his knees before the great and terrible monster, he cried in piteous tones.

"Dear Lord and Master, Honest Sir, Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep—I know not how to call thee, I cannot tell. Destroy not my Christian soul for my innocent boldness; have me not cut down and slain; but let me plead with thee. I have three daughters, three fair maidens good and kind; and I promised to bring them each a gift—for the eldest a jewelled crown, for the second a crystal mirror, and for the youngest the Little Scarlet Flower whose beauty is greater than anything in the world. I found the gifts for my eldest daughters, but not for my youngest, no matter where I looked. Then I saw it in thy garden, the Little Scarlet Flower whose beauty is greater than anything in the world, and I thought that such a very wealthy lord, so glorious and mighty, would not begrudge the Little Scarlet Flower for which my dear youngest daughter asked. I repent my crime before thy Majesty. Forgive me, I was foolish and stupid, let me go free to my dear daughters and let me have the Little Scarlet Flower as a gift for my beloved youngest daughter. I shall pay thee in golden coin, whatever price thou demandest."

A great roar of laughter rang through the forest, like thunder rumbling in the heavens, and the Beast of the Forest, that Denizen of the Deep, addressed the merchant thus,

"I have no need of thy golden coin; I have no room to store my own. Ask no mercy of me, my loyal servants shall tear thee to pieces, into little portions. There is but one way out. I will send thee home unscathed, reward thee with untold treasure, grant thee the Little Scarlet Flower, if thou wilt give me thy word as an honest merchant and a pledge in thy hand that thou wilt send in thy place one of thy daughters. She shall come to no harm, she shall live here in honour and freedom, just as thou hast done in my palace. I am lonely here by myself and wish to have a companion."

At that, the merchant threw himself upon the damp earth, weeping tears of anguish. When he gazed upon the Beast of the Forest, that Denizen of the Deep, and thought of his daughters good and kind, he cried all the louder; for the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, was indeed exceedingly terrifying. For a long time the honest merchant lay beating the ground and shedding tears; but presently he spoke in pitiful tones,

"Honest Sir, Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep! But what if my daughters will not come to thee of their own free will? Should I bind them hand and foot and send them to thee by force? And what way should they take to reach thee? It took me two years to find my way here—by what places, by what paths, I know not."

The Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, answered,

"I want no captive maiden here; let thy daughter come out of love for thee, of her own will and desire. And if thy daughters will not come hither of their own will and desire, then thou must come thyself and I shall have thee put to a cruel death. How to journey hither is not thy concern; I shall give thee this ring from my finger: whoever puts it on the little finger of his right hand will be wherever he wishes in the twinkling of an eye. I grant thee leave to go home for three days and three nights."

The merchant thought long and hard and finally made up his mind,

"It is better for me to see my daughters again, give them a father's blessing and, if they are not willing to save me from death, then I must prepare to meet death as a Christian and return to the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep."

He spoke his thoughts aloud, as there was no falseness in his heart. Even so, the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep knew what was in his mind, saw he was an honest man and, taking no written pledge from him, took the gold ring off his finger and handed it to the merchant.

Hardly had the merchant had time to slip it on the little finger of his right hand than he found himself at the gates of his own spacious courtyard; and at that very moment, there arrived his richly-laden caravans and his loyal servants bringing treasure and merchandise thrice the value of what he had taken forth. A great commotion arose within the house, his daughters jumped up from their embroidery frames where they had been embroidering widths of silken cloth with gold and silver thread, and they rushed to embrace their father, hug and kiss him; and the two eldest sisters were more doting than the youngest. Presently, they saw that something was amiss, that a secret sorrow lay upon their father's heart. And his elder daughters asked anxiously whether he had lost his great fortune; but the youngest daughter gave no thought to his fortune, and said,

"Your fortune is of no consequence to me; riches can be obtained again. Do reveal to me your heartfelt grief."

And the merchant made answer to his dear daughters, good and kind.

"I have not lost my great fortune, but multiplied it three or four fold; another sorrow presses upon me. That I'll relate to you tomorrow, for today let us make merry."

He ordered that his iron-bound travelling chests be brought in: for his eldest daughter, he took out the golden crown—made from the gold of Araby that neither would fire melt nor water rust—set with precious stones; for the second daughter, he took out the gift of the mirror of Eastern crystal; and for his youngest daughter, he took out the gift of the Little Scarlet Flower in a golden vase. The eldest daughters were beside themselves with joy, carried off their gifts to their lofty chambers to try them out to their heart's delight. But the youngest daughter trembled violently on seeing the Little Scarlet Flower and began to weep, as if her heart would break.

Then her father spoke thus,  
“What is it, my dear darling daughter? Why do you not take the flower you so desired? There is none finer in the whole wide world.”

The youngest daughter took the Little Scarlet Flower, reluctantly it seemed, kissed her father’s hands and shed burning tears of sorrow. By and by, the elder daughters hurried in, still rapturous with delight, having tried out their father’s presents. Then everyone took his place at oaken tables covered with white embroidered tablecloths, laden with choice sweetmeats and meads; and they all set to eating and drinking, refreshing themselves and comforting their father with soothing speeches.

Towards evening, guests began to arrive and the merchant’s house was soon filled with good friends and kinsfolk and lovers of good cheer. Till midnight the company sat and talked, and never had the honest merchant seen so grand an evening of feasting in his home; and he, like all the company, marvelled whence everything had come—the gold and silver dishes and the fantastic viands such as had never graced his house before.

In the morning, the merchant summoned his eldest daughter, recounted all his adventures, from beginning to end, and asked her would she save him from a terrible death by going to live with the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. But the eldest daughter refused outright, saying,

“Let it be that daughter who desired the Little Scarlet Flower—let her go and save her father.”

So the honest merchant summoned his second daughter, told her all that had befallen him, from beginning to end, and asked her would she save him from a terrible death by going to live with the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. But the second daughter refused outright, saying,

“Let it be that daughter who desired the Little Scarlet Flower—let her go and save her father.”

Then the honest merchant summoned his youngest daughter and began telling his story, from beginning to end; yet even before he



had time to finish, the beloved youngest daughter fell upon her knees before him and said,

"Give me your blessing, Sire, my dear father. I will go to the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, and live with him. It was for me you fetched the Little Scarlet Flower and it is my duty to rescue you."

Tears filled the honest merchant's eyes as he embraced his beloved youngest daughter, and he spoke these words to her,

"O my dear, good, kind daughter, youngest and fondest, may a father's blessing be upon you for saving your father from a cruel death and for going of your own free will and desire to live with the awesome Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. You will live in his palace, in great splendour and ease; but where that palace is, no one knows and no one can tell, for there is no way to it by horse or foot—not even for bounding beast or swift-flying bird. We shall hear no word or news of you, nor you of us. I know not how I will live out my days of anguish, never seeing your sweet face, nor hearing your tender words . . . I part with you for ever and ever, as if I were burying you alive in the earth."

And the beloved youngest daughter answered her father,

"Weep not, grieve not, Sire, my dear father. I shall live in wealth and ease; I fear not the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, and I shall serve him truly and loyally, fulfil his every lordly wish; and, I pray, he may take pity upon me. Mourn me not as dead while yet I live—one day, God grant, I shall return to you."

The honest merchant would not be comforted by her words; he wept and sobbed as though his heart would break.

The elder sisters came in haste, their wailing filling the whole house: so sorry they were, if you please, for their dear younger sister. Yet the youngest sister displayed no sign of sorrow, neither wept nor sighed, but made ready for her long uncertain journey; and she took with her the Little Scarlet Flower in its golden vase.

Three days and nights soon passed and the time came for the merchant to part with his beloved youngest daughter. He kissed and embraced her, bathed her in hot tears and pronounced his parental blessing upon her. Then, taking from an iron-bound casket the ring

of the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, he put the ring on the little finger of his dear daughter's right hand—and she vanished in an instant with all her belongings.

She found herself in the palace of the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, in a high stone chamber; she was lying on a bed of carved gold with crystal feet; under her was a mattress of swans-down, and over her a coverlet of gold brocade. It was as if she had lived there all her life, had lain down to sleep and awakened. Sweet music played, such as she had never heard before.

She rose from the bed of down, and saw all her belongings and the Little Scarlet Flower in its golden vase there in the chamber, all set out on tables of green copper malachite. The chamber was richly furnished with much finery and all kinds of wonderful things: there were chairs to sit on, couches to lie on, garments to wear and mirrors to see herself in. One wall was a mirror, another was of gold, a third of silver and the fourth of elephant and mammoth ivory studded with precious gems.

"This must be my bedchamber," she thought to herself.

Wishing to investigate the whole palace, she went forth to examine all the lofty chambers; and she walked for a long time, marvelling at all the wonders that she saw. Each chamber was lovelier than the last, and all more beautiful than the honest merchant, her dear father, had described. Then, taking the dear Little Scarlet Flower from its golden vase, she went out into the verdant gardens, where the birds sang her heavenly songs, and the trees and bushes and flowers waved their heads and seemed to bow before her; the fountains of water spouted higher and the clear springs babbled louder as she approached. And she came upon the high place, the grassy mound on which the honest merchant had picked the Little Scarlet Flower, more lovely than anything in the whole wide world. She took the Little Scarlet Flower from its golden vase, wishing to plant it in its former place; but it flew from her hand and attached itself to its former stem, blossoming more resplendently than before.

She was much amazed at this miracle of miracles, wonder of wonders, but was happy for her Little Scarlet Flower of which she

was so fond. Then, she returned to her palace chambers and, in one of them, found a table set for her. And she thought to herself,

"It appears, the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, is not angry, but will be to me a gracious master."

No sooner had the thought entered her head than words of fire appeared on the wall of white marble,

"I am not thy master, but thine obedient slave. Thou art the mistress, and I shall gladly fulfil thine every wish, thine every command."

She read the words of fire and they vanished instantly from the wall of white marble, as if they had never been. Then it came into her head to write a letter to her father and give him tidings of her. Hardly had the thought occurred to her than she saw a gold pen and ink and paper lying before her. And she wrote this letter to her dear father and her beloved sisters,

"Weep not for me, nor grieve, for I am living like a princess in the palace of the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep; I neither see nor hear him, but he writes to me in words of fire on a wall of white marble; and he knows my every thought and instantly fulfils my every wish. He calls me the mistress and will not have me call him my lord."

Scarcely had she written the letter and sealed it with a seal, than the letter vanished from her hands and sight, as if it had never been. The music began to play even more tunefully than before, as sweetmeats and meads appeared upon the table in vessels of burnished gold. Though she had never in her life dined all by herself, she sat down cheerfully at the table, ate and drank and refreshed herself, enjoying the dulcet music. After dinner, having ate her fill, she lay down to rest; and the music grew softer, that it might not disturb her slumbers.

When she had slept, she rose with light heart ready to walk in the gardens once more, for before dinner she had not managed to see more than half of them, or to behold all the wonders they contained. All the trees, bushes and flowers bent down before her, and the ripe fruit—pears and peaches and juicy apples—tempted her to taste

them. After walking for some time, till evening was nigh, she returned to her lofty chambers, and there she saw a table laid with all manner of sweetmeats and meads, all most excellent.

After supper, she went back to the chamber of white marble, where she had read the words of fire on the wall; and again she saw words inscribe themselves on the very same wall,

"Is my mistress pleased with her gardens and chambers, with the hospitality and attention?"

And the merchant's lovely young daughter answered in a happy voice,

"Call me not thy mistress, be thou forever my good master, kind and gracious. I shall never disobey thy will; and I thank thee for all thy hospitality. Nowhere in the whole wide world are there such magnificent lofty chambers and verdant gardens. Why then should I not be pleased? Never in my life have I seen such wonders; I still cannot believe it is all true. But there is one thing: I fear to sleep alone; nowhere in thy lofty chambers is there a living soul but me."

And these words of fire appeared upon the wall,

"Have no fear, my lovely mistress. Nor shalt thou sleep alone; for thy handmaid, loyal and true, awaits thee now. Many human souls dwell within these chambers, only thou dost not see or hear them; they all watch over thee, as I do, day and night: we shall not suffer the wind to blow on thee or a speck of dust to settle upon thee."

Then, the merchant's lovely young daughter went off to her bed-chamber and there she found her handmaid, loyal and true, standing at her bed; the girl was half-dead with fright, but rejoiced to see her mistress, kissed her lily-white hands and embraced her dainty feet. Her mistress, too, was pleased to see her and set to questioning her about her own dear father, her elder sisters and about her other maids and servants. And then she herself began to describe her own adventures—so that the pair of them did not sleep before the first rays of dawn.

Thus it was the merchant's lovely young daughter came to live and prosper in her new home. Each day, new expensive robes were laid out for her, such priceless finery that words cannot describe

or a pen depict. Each day saw new and varied amusements and diversions: riding through the dark forests in horseless, unharnessed carriages, all to the sound of sweet music, with the trees parting and giving her a wide, wide road to pass over smoothly. And she began to busy herself with maidenly handiwork: she embroidered widths of material in gold and silver and made fringes with finely-set pearls; she began to send gifts to her dear father, but she presented the richest width to her kind guardian, to that very Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. And as the days passed by, she began to go more frequently to the white marble hall that she might utter grateful speeches to her generous guardian, and read his replies and greetings etched in words of fire upon the wall.

So time passed—the tale is sooner told than the deed is done—and the merchant's lovely young daughter grew accustomed to her new life and home. Nothing surprised or frightened her any more. She was served by invisible attendants who ministered to her every need and drove her in horseless carriages, played music for her and performed her every command. And she grew daily more fond of her gracious master; she saw that he loved her more than himself and had not called her the mistress for naught; and she longed to hearken to his voice, she longed to converse with him without entering the white marble chamber, without reading the words of fire.

She began to beg and pray, but the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, would not soon consent to her entreaties; for he feared that his voice would terrify her. But she continued to beg and beseech her kind guardian, and he could not refuse her any longer. Finally, he wrote in words of fire for the last time upon the white marble wall,

"Come into the garden today, sit in thy favourite arbour that is twined with leaves and branches and blossoms and speak thus: 'Speak with me, my faithful slave'."

Barely had a moment passed than the merchant's lovely young daughter ran into the gardens, entered her favourite arbour twined with leaves and branches and blossoms and sat on the brocade-covered bench. Out of breath, her heart beating wildly like that of a trapped bird, she uttered these words,



"Fear not, my kind and gracious master, that thou wilt frighten me with thy voice. After all thy kindnesses, I would not fear a wild beast's roar. Be not afraid, speak with me."

She heard the sound of someone sighing behind the arbour, and a terrible voice gave out, wild and snarling, hoarse and gruff, though it was speaking low as yet. And the merchant's lovely young daughter at first gave a start at the sound of the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep; yet she mastered her terror and did not show she was afraid. Presently, she began to listen to his kindly and welcoming words, his wise and prudent speeches, and her heart grew light.

From that time on, there was constant talk between them, nearly the whole day long, as they walked in the verdant gardens or drove through the dark forests or rested in the lofty chambers of the palace. The merchant's lovely young daughter only had to ask,

"Art thou there, my good and gracious master?"

And the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, would reply, "I am here, my fair mistress, thy faithful slave, thine eternal friend."

His wild and terrible voice made her afraid no longer, and they would have tender talks that had no end.

Time passed, whether fast or slow, I do not know: the tale is sooner told than the deed is done. But it was not long before the merchant's lovely young daughter longed to see the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, with her own eyes. And she began to beg and beseech him. For a long time he did not consent, afraid of frightening her—for he truly was a terrible sight to behold, more ugly than words can tell or a pen can depict. The wild creatures, as well as humans, lived in dread of the very sight of him, and would cower in their lairs at his approach. And the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, spoke thus to her,

"Beseech and beg me not, my fair mistress, so delightful to behold, to show thee my horrible face and my misshapen body. To my voice thou art now accustomed; we live together in peace and concord, and scarcely are we ever apart; and thou lovest me for my untold

love for thee. Yet if thou shouldst see me as I am, hideous and horrible, thou wouldst hate me, unfortunate that I am, and drive me from thy sight; and I should die of grief parted from thee."

But the merchant's lovely young daughter would not hearken to his words, and entreated him more earnestly than before, vowing that no terrible monster on earth would frighten her and that she would never cease to love her own kind master; and she said to him,

"If thou art old, be then my grandfather; if thou art of middle years, be my uncle; if thou art young, be as my brother; and as long as I shall live, be thou the friend of my heart."

Long, long did the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, resist her requests, but he could not endure the entreaties and tears of the fair maiden, and at last he said,

"I cannot go against thy wishes since I love thee more than myself; I will grant thy wish though I know that I destroy my happiness and will die before my time. Come to the garden in the grey twilight, when the sun is setting behind the forest, and say,

"Show thyself to me, faithful friend!"

"And I will show thee my hideous face and my misshapen body. And if thou canst stay with me here no longer, I shall not wish to keep thee here against thy will in eternal torment; thou wilt find my gold ring beneath the pillow in thy bedchamber. Put it on the little finger of thy right hand, and thou wilt find thyself in thy dear father's house; and never more shalt thou hear of me."

Unalarmed and unafraid, the merchant's lovely young daughter was firm in her resolve. Straight away, not dallying for an instant, she went into the garden to await the appointed hour; and when grey twilight came and the sun was sinking behind the forest, she called,

"Show thyself to me, my faithful friend!"

And at a distance, the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, showed himself to her; he did but walk across the path, and quickly disappeared into the thick bushes. But when the merchant's lovely young daughter caught sight of him, she waved her lily-white hands, let out a cry of anguish and fainted upon the path. For dreadful indeed was the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep: his arms

were crooked, he had the talons of a wild beast, the legs of a horse, and great camel humps before and behind; he was covered in hair from head to foot, he had a boar's tusks sticking out of his mouth, a nose curved like an eagle's beak, and the eyes of an owl.

Having lain there senseless for a long time, the merchant's lovely young daughter finally came to and heard someone nearby weeping bitterly and sobbing in a pitiful voice,

"Thou hast slain me, my beloved fair maiden: no more shall I see thy gracious face; no longer wilt thou even suffer my voice; thus I must die an untimely death."

And she felt sorry and ashamed, mastered her great fear and timid maidenly heart, then spoke in a firm voice.

"Nay, have no fear, my kind and gracious master; I shall never again be afraid of thine awesome form, I shall not part from thee or forget thy goodness; now show thyself to me in thy former shape; only because it was the first time was I afraid."

The Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, showed himself to her in his awesome form, hideous and misshapen; but he did not venture near, however much she called him. They walked together till dark and talked as before with love and wisdom; and the merchant's lovely young daughter felt no fear. Next day, she saw the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, in the bright light of day and although, at first, she took fright on beholding him, she gave no sign of it, and soon her fear was gone. Now they conversed together more than before: the whole day long they were together; at dinner and supper they ate their fill of sweetmeats and refreshed themselves with meads; then they wandered through the verdant gardens and drove through the dark forests in horseless carriages.

And not a little time passed by: the tale is sooner told than the deed is done. But one night, in her sleep, the merchant's lovely young daughter dreamed that her father was lying sick; and an unconsolable grief fell upon her. When the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, saw her in grief and tears, he, too, was sorely grieved and asked the reason for her grief and tears. So she related to him her unhappy dream and begged his leave to visit her dear father and

beloved sisters. And the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, pronounced these words,

"What need hast thou of my leave? Thou hast my gold ring: put it on the little finger of thy right hand and thou wilt at once find thyself in thy dear father's house. Remain with him as long as thou wilt, but this I say to thee: if thou dost not return at the end of three days and nights, thou wilt not find me on this earth; I shall die that very instant because I love thee more than myself and cannot live without thee."

She began to reassure him with solemn words and vows that she would return to his lofty palace exactly one hour before the three days and nights expired. Taking leave of her master, kind and gracious, she put the gold ring on the little finger of her right hand and found herself in the spacious courtyard of the merchant, her own dear father. She went up to the high porch of his stone mansion, and all the servants and attendants came running to meet her with a great clamour and shouting; and her beloved sisters ran to greet her and, when they saw her, were filled with wonder at her maidenly beauty and her royal apparel. Taking her by her lily-white hands, they led her to her dear father; her father was lying sick, sick and woeful, for he had pined for her day and night, shedding bitter tears. And he could hardly credit his good fortune when he saw his beloved youngest daughter, so good and sweet and fair; and he marvelled at her maidenly beauty and her royal apparel.

For long they kissed and embraced, and comforted one another with tender words. Then she told her dear father and beloved elder sisters of her manner of life with the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, all there was to tell, not withholding a single thing. And the merchant rejoiced at her rich and royal life and marvelled that she had grown accustomed to the sight of her terrible master and that she was unafraid of the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep; he himself trembled and shook at the mere memory of him. But the elder sisters were envious of her, hearing of their younger sister's countless riches and the royal power she had over her master, as if he were her slave.

That day passed like a single hour, and the second day went by like a minute; and on the third day the elder sisters set to persuading their younger sister not to return to the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep.

"Let him perish, even as he deserves..." they said.

But their dear guest, the youngest sister, grew angry with her elder sisters and spoke these words to them,

"If I repay my good and gracious master by a cruel death for all his kindness and his ardent, boundless love, then I shall not be worthy of living in this world, and I should be given to wild beasts to tear me apart."

Her father, the honest merchant, praised her for these noble words, and it was decided that his beloved, youngest daughter, good and kind, would return exactly one hour before the appointed time to the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. But the sisters were resentful and devised a plan cunning and unkind: they put back by a full hour all the clocks in the house, without the merchant or all his loyal servants and attendants knowing of it.

And when the real hour arrived, the merchant's lovely young daughter felt pain and heartache, as if something was chafing her; and she looked constantly at her father's clocks, the English and the German—but they showed it was too early to set off on her distant journey. All the while, her sisters were telling and asking her about this and that, so as to detain her. At last, her heart could bear it no longer; the merchant's lovely young daughter, her father's favourite, bade farewell to the honest merchant, her dear father, received his blessing, and bade farewell to her elder sisters, to the faithful servants and the attendants. A minute before the appointed hour, she put the gold ring on the little finger of her right hand and found herself in the white stone palace, in the lofty chambers of the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep. She wondered why he did not meet her, so she cried in a loud voice,

"Where art thou, my gracious lord, my faithful friend? Why dost thou not meet me? I have returned earlier than the appointed time by a full hour and a minute."

No answer came, no greeting hailed her; there was a deathly silence. In the verdant gardens, the birds were not singing their heavenly songs, the fountains of water were not cascading, the clear springs were no longer babbling and no sweet music played in the lofty chambers. The merchant's lovely daughter was full of foreboding and felt a shudder pass through her heart; she ran through the lofty chambers and the verdant gardens, called her gracious master in a voice of despair—but no answer or greeting or responding call was anywhere to be heard. Then she ran to the grassy mound where grew in beauty her beloved Little Scarlet Flower; and she beheld the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, lying on the mound clasping the Little Scarlet Flower in his misshapen paws. She thought at first he had fallen asleep while awaiting her and was now in a deep slumber.

Gently, the merchant's lovely daughter began to wake him, but he did not hear her; and she began to rouse him more strongly, seizing him by his shaggy paw. Then it was she saw that the Beast of the Forest, Denizen of the Deep, was not breathing, was lying as one dead...

Her clear eyes grew dim, her legs gave way and she fell to her knees; she put her lily-white arms around the head of her gracious master, that hideous, horrible head, and she cried in a voice of anguish,

"Arise, awake, O friend of my heart, I love thee as my cherished sweetheart!"

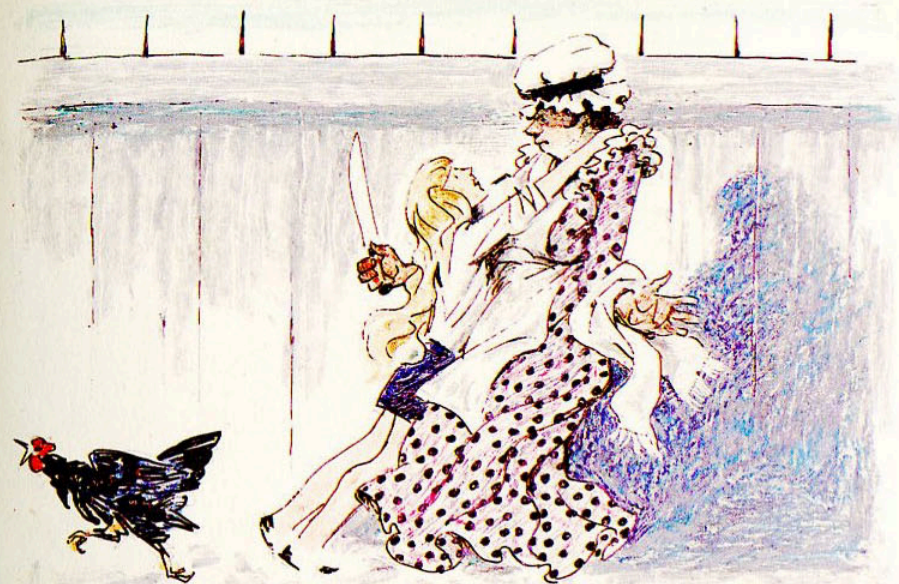
No sooner had she uttered these words than lightning flashed on every side, the earth shook from a great clap of thunder, a stone thunder-arrow struck the grassy mound, and the merchant's lovely young daughter fell senseless to the ground. Whether she lay there for long, I know not; but when she came to, she found herself in a lofty chamber of white marble, sitting on a golden throne encrusted with precious stones. And a young prince, as handsome as a picture, had his arm around her; on his head he wore a royal crown and he was dressed in cloth of gold. And before stood her father and sisters, and around them a kneeling retinue of courtiers all dressed in gold and silver brocade.

And the handsome young prince with the royal crown upon his head spoke thus to her,

"Thou didst love me, my peerless beauty, for my kind heart and love for thee; thou didst love me in the form of a misshapen monster. Then love me now in my human form and be my cherished bride. A wicked witch was wrathful with my late father, a great and mighty king; so she stole me away while I was but a child and, by her satanic sorcery and evil power, did turn me into a horrible monster; she laid a spell upon me that I should live in that misshapen form, hideous and terrifying to every man and every creature on God's earth, until a fair maiden should be found, whatever her birth or position, who would love me in my monstrous form and would wish to be my wedded wife. Then the spell would end and I should once more be a human being, young and pleasing to behold. Full thirty years I lived thus, a monster and a terror, and I enticed to my enchanted palace eleven maidens fair; thou wert the twelfth. Not a single maiden loved me for my tenderness and goodness, for the kindness of my heart. Thou alone didst love me, hideous and misshapen as I was; thou didst love me for my tenderness and goodness, for the kindness of my heart, for my untold love for thee; and thus thou shalt be the wife of a glorious king, the queen of a mighty realm."

All there assembled marvelled at the story, and the courtiers bowed down to the ground. The honest merchant gave his blessing to his beloved youngest daughter and the young royal prince. And the bride and bridegroom were congratulated by the envious elder sisters and all the faithful servants, all the great nobles and the valiant knights. And without more ado a wedding was held and a great feasting began. And the bride and groom lived forever after in great cheer and prosperity.

I too was there, drank mead and yet  
Ne'er did get my whiskers wet.



*Antoni Pogorelsky*

## THE LITTE BLACK HEN, OR THE UNDERGROUND PEOPLE

A Fairy Story for Children

Some forty years ago<sup>1</sup> in St Petersburg, in the First Line<sup>2</sup> on Vassilievsky Island lived the master of a boarding school for boys which many will probably remember well to this day, although the building which the school occupied has long since

<sup>1</sup> This story was written in 1829.

<sup>2</sup> Vassilievsky (Basil's) Island was a district in St Petersburg; each side of the streets on Vassilievsky Island was called a line.

made way for another bearing no resemblance to the earliest one. At that time St Petersburg was famed throughout Europe for its beauty, although it was nothing like what it is now. There were no delightful shady avenues on the prospects of Vassilievsky Island. In place of today's fine pavements there were wooden planks, often rotten. St Isaac's Bridge was narrow and crooked, and presented a very different appearance from now. In short, St Petersburg was not what it is today. Towns have the advantage over people that they occasionally grow more beautiful with the years. However, this is a digression. Some other time and on some other occasion I may perhaps speak in more detail about the changes that have taken place in St Petersburg during my lifetime, but now I shall turn once again to the boarding school which, some forty years ago, stood in the First Line on Vassilievsky Island.

The building which you will not find today was a two-storeyed one covered with Dutch tiles. The entrance porch was wooden and faced the street. From the lobby a fairly steep staircase led up to the second storey consisting of eight or nine rooms, where the boarding-school master lived on one side and there were classrooms on the other. The children's dormitories were on the ground floor, on the right side of the lobby, and on the left lived two elderly Dutch ladies, both over a hundred years old, who had seen Peter the Great with their own eyes and even spoken to him.

Among the thirty or forty children in the boarding school was a boy named Alyosha, who could have been no more than nine or ten at the time. His parents, who lived far away from St Petersburg, had brought him to the capital two years earlier, delivered him to the boarding school and returned home, after paying the schoolmaster the necessary fees for several years in advance. Alyosha was a nice clever boy, good at his lessons, and everyone was fond of him. In spite of this he was often lonely at the boarding school, however, and sometimes even sad as well. Particularly at the beginning he could not get used to the idea that he was parted from his parents.

But then he gradually grew accustomed to his position, and there were even moments when, playing with his friends, he thought it was more fun in the boarding school than in his parents' house.

In general the days of learning passed quickly and pleasantly for him, but when Saturday came and his friends hurried home to their families, Alyosha felt his solitude bitterly. On Sundays and holidays he was alone all the time, and then his only comfort was reading the books which the schoolmaster allowed him to borrow from his small library. At that time the fashion in literature was for tales of chivalry and fairy stories, and the library which Alyosha used consisted mostly of books of this kind.

So by the age of ten, Alyosha was already well acquainted with the deeds of the most famous knights, at least as they were described in novels. His favourite occupation in the long winter evenings, on Sundays and other holidays was to imagine himself in bygone ages... Especially during the vacations, when he was parted from his school-fellows for a long time and often spent whole days on his own, his young imagination would wander through knight's castles, terrible ruins or dark dense forests.

I have forgotten to tell you that the house had a rather large courtyard which was separated from the alley by a wooden fence of barge planks. The gate and wicket that led into the alley were always locked, and so Alyosha had never been able to go into the alley which strongly excited his imagination. Every time he was allowed to play in the courtyard in his recreation periods, the first thing he did was to run up to the fence. He would stand there on tiptoe, staring through the round holes in the fence. Alyosha did not know that these holes were from wooden nails used to make barges, and he thought that a good fairy had made them just for him. He kept waiting for the fairy to appear in the alley and hand him a toy or a talisman through a hole, or a letter from his father or mother from whom he had not received any news for a long time. But to his extreme regret no one even vaguely resembling a fairy appeared.

Another of Alyosha's occupations was to feed the hens, who lived by the fence in a small house specially built for them and played and ran about all day in the yard. Alyosha very soon made their acquaintance, knew them all by name, broke up their fights, and punished the trouble-makers by depriving them for several days of the crumbs that he brushed off the tablecloth after dinner and supper. Of all the hens he was particularly fond of a black crested one called *Blackie*. Blackie showed more affection for him than all the others: she even allowed him to stroke her sometimes, so Alyosha kept the best pieces for her. She was of a quiet disposition, rarely strutted with the others, and seemed to be fonder of Alyosha than of all her friends.

Once (it was during the winter vacations), on a fine and unusually warm day, Alyosha was allowed to play outside. The schoolmaster and his wife were very busy that day. They were having the inspector of the schools to dinner, and so the day before they had spent from dawn to dusk scrubbing floors, dusting and polishing mahogany tables and dressers. The schoolmaster himself went to purchase provisions for the table: white Archangel veal, a huge ham and candied fruit. Alyosha also did what he could to help with the preparations: they made him cut a pretty frill of white paper for the ham and decorate with paper patterns the six wax candles specially bought for the occasion. On the appointed day the hairdresser appeared early in the morning and demonstrated his art on the schoolmaster's boucles, toupet and long plait. Then he turned his attentions to the schoolmaster's wife, pomaded and powdered her ringlets, and piled a whole hothouse of different flowers on her head, among which flashed two well-placed diamond signet rings, which her husband had been given by pupils' parents. When her hair had been dressed, she put on an old dressing gown and went about her household duties, while making sure that her coiffure was not spoilt. To this end she did not go into the kitchen, but stood at the doorway and gave instructions to her cook. In cases of necessity she sent her husband in there, whose coiffure was not so high.

In the course of all these activities Alyosha was completely forgotten, and he took advantage of the fact to play outside in the yard. As was his custom, he first went up to the wooden fence and spent a long time looking through a hole; but as usual hardly anyone walked along the alley, and he turned with a sigh to his beloved hens. No sooner had he sat down on a log and started calling them to him, when he saw the cook beside him with a big knife. Alyosha had never liked the cook—a bad-tempered, sharp-tongued woman. But ever since he had noticed that she was the reason why his hens dropped in number from time to time, he liked her even less. And when one day he had happened to see in the kitchen his favourite cockerel hanging by the legs with its throat cut, he felt fear and revulsion for her. Seeing her now with the knife, he immediately guessed what it meant and, realising bitterly that he was unable to help his friends, jumped up and ran a long way off.

"Alyosha! Alyosha! Help me catch a hen!" shouted the cook.

But Alyosha only ran faster, hid by the fence behind the hen-house and did not notice the tears rolling out of his eyes and falling on the ground.

He stood by the hen-house for quite a long time, his heart beating hard, while the cook ran round the yard, sometimes calling the hens, sometimes scolding them.

Suddenly Alyosha's heart beat harder than ever: he heard the voice of his beloved Blackie. She was clucking desperately and he seemed to hear her say:

*Cluck, cluck, clucky!*

*Alyosha, help Blackie!*

*Clucky, clucky!*

*Blackie, Blackie!*

Alyosha could stay where he was no longer. Sobbing loudly, he rushed to the cook and threw himself on her neck just as she had grabbed Blackie by the wing.

"Dear, nice Trinushka!" he exclaimed, the tears pouring down his cheeks. "Please don't touch my Blackie!"

Alyosha had caught hold of the cook's neck so unexpectedly, that she let go of Blackie, who took advantage of this to fly up in fright to the roof of the shed, where she continued to cluck. But Alyosha now seemed to hear her teasing the cook and shouting:

*Cluck, cluck, clucky!*  
*You couldn't catch Blackie!*  
*Clucky, clucky!*  
*Blackie, Blackie!*

Meanwhile the cook was beside herself with rage and wanted to tell the schoolmaster, but Alyosha would not let her go. He caught hold of her dress and began to plea so touchingly that she stopped.

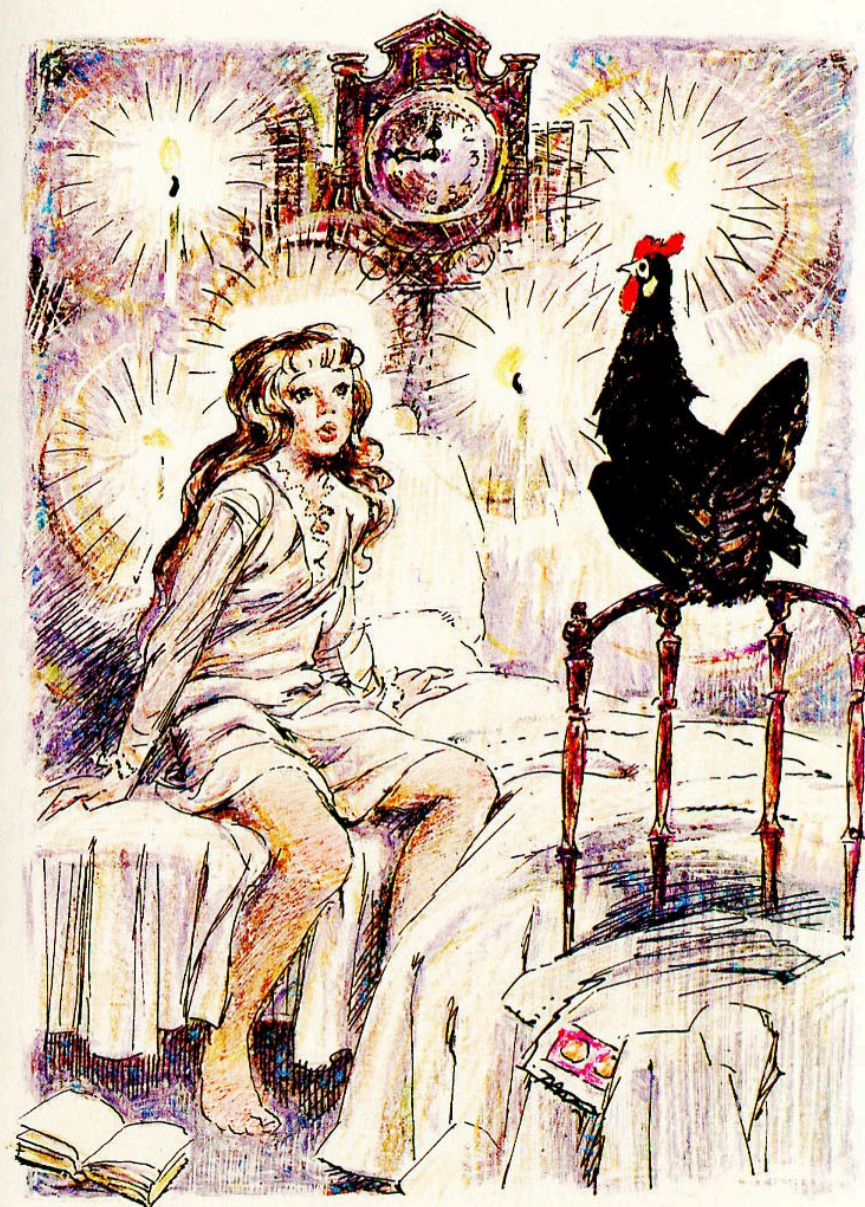
"Dear Trinushka!" he said. "You're so good, nice and kind... Please leave my Blackie alone! Look what I'll give you, if you do."

Out of his pocket Alyosha drew an old goldpiece, his most treasured possession, because it was a present from his grandmother. The cook looked at the coin, glanced at the windows of the house to make sure that no one could see, and stretched out a hand for the coin. Alyosha was very sorry to part with it, but he remembered about Blackie and handed over the precious gift resolutely.

Thus Blackie was saved from a cruel and certain death.

As soon as the cook retired to the house, Blackie flew down from the roof and ran up to Alyosha. She seemed to know that he was her deliverer: she ran around him, flapping her wings and clucking joyfully. All morning she followed him round the yard, like a dog, as if she wanted to tell him something, but could not. At least he could not make out her clucking.

Two hours or so before dinner the guests began to arrive. Alyosha was summoned upstairs and dressed in a shirt with a round collar and pleated lawn cuffs, white pantaloons, and a broad blue silk sash. His long fair hair, which almost reached his waist, was well



combed, divided into two equal bunches and draped on either side of his chest. That was the fashion for children in those days.

Then he was told how to click his heels when the inspector came into the room and what to say if he were asked any questions.

Any other time Alyosha would have been pleased at the arrival of the inspector, whom he wanted to see very much because, judging by the respect with which the schoolmaster and his wife spoke of him, he imagined that he must be a famous knight in shining armour and a plumed helmet. But this time his curiosity gave way to the thoughts that were preoccupying him: about the black hen. He kept imagining the cook chasing her with a knife and Blackie clucking for all she was worth. He was most vexed at not being able to understand what she was trying to tell him, and he longed to go to the hen-house... But there was nothing for it: he must wait until dinner was over.

At last the inspector arrived. His arrival was announced by the schoolmaster's wife who had been sitting by the window, staring in the direction from which he was expected.

Everything went into motion: the schoolmaster sped out of the door to meet him below, by the porch, and the visitors rose from their seats. Even Alyosha forgot about his hen for a moment and went to the window to watch the knight getting off his noble charger. But he did not manage to see him: the inspector had already entered the house. By the porch, instead of a noble charger, stood an ordinary passenger sledge. Alyosha was very surprised. "If I were a knight," he thought, "I would never ride in a sledge, only on horseback!"

Meanwhile the doors were thrown wide open, and the schoolmaster's wife began a slow curtsy in expectation of the highly respected guest, who duly appeared shortly afterwards. At first he was hidden by the fat schoolmaster's wife, who was standing in the doorway; but when she finished her long greeting, curtseying lower than usual, Alyosha saw behind her to his extreme aston-

ishment... not a plumed helmet, but a small baldish head, powdered white, and adorned only, as Alyosha noted later, by a small pigtail! When he entered the drawing room, Alyosha was even more surprised to see that, in spite of the simple grey tail-coat, which the inspector wore instead of shining armour, everyone treated him with the greatest of respect.

However strange all this seemed to Alyosha, however delighted he would have been at any other time by the unusually rich fare on the table, today he paid little attention to it. His small head was still full of what had happened that morning with Blackie. The dessert was served: preserves, apples, pears, figs, grapes and walnuts; but even now he did not stop thinking about his hen for a moment. And as soon as they rose from the table, he went up to the schoolmaster, his heart trembling with fear and hope, and asked if he might go out to play in the yard.

"You may," the schoolmaster replied, "but do not stay there long: it will soon be dark."

Alyosha hastily donned his red overcoat lined with squirrel fur and his green velvet cap trimmed with sable and ran to the fence. When he got there, the hens were beginning to settle down for the night. They were sleepy and not very pleased with the crumbs he had brought them. Only Blackie seemed to have no desire to sleep: she ran up to him, flapped her wings and began to cluck again. Alyosha played with her for a long time; eventually, when it got dark and was time to go home, he locked the hen-house himself, having made sure that his beloved Blackie was settled on the perch. As he was leaving, he seemed to see her eyes shining in the darkness like stars and hear her saying softly:

"Alyosha! Alyosha! Stay with me!"

Alyosha returned to the house and sat alone all evening in the classrooms, while the guests stayed until past ten in the other half of the house. Before they had all left, Alyosha went down to his bedroom in the lower storey, undressed, climbed into bed and put out the light. He could not get to sleep for a long time. Finally sleep overcame him, and he had just managed to start talking to Blackie

in a dream when, unfortunately, he was awakened by the sound of the departing guests.

A little later the schoolmaster, having seen the inspector to his sledge with a candle, came into the dormitory, looked around to make sure that all was in order, and left, locking the door behind him.

It was a moon-lit night, and a pale moonbeam shone into the room through the lightly closed shutters. Alyosha lay with open eyes and listened for a long time to them walking about upstairs tidying the chairs and tables.

At last all was quiet. He looked at the bed next to his, slightly lit by moonlight, and noticed that the white sheet hanging almost to the floor, was moving slightly. He began to stare at it... then he heard something scratching under the sheet, and a little later a voice seemed to call him quietly:

"Alyosha! Alyosha!"

Alyosha was afraid. He was alone in the room, and immediately thought there must be a robber under the bed. But then he reasoned that a robber would not call him by his name, and cheered up slightly, although his heart was trembling. Sitting up in bed, he saw that the sheet really was moving... and heard someone say quite clearly:

"Alyosha! Alyosha!"

Suddenly the white sheet rose up, and from behind it appeared... the black hen!

"Oh! It's you, Blackie!" Alyosha exclaimed. "How did you get in here?"

Blackie flapped her wings, flew up onto his bed and said in a human voice:

"It's me, Alyosha! You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"Why should I be afraid of you?" he replied. "I love you; only I'm surprised that you can speak so well: I did not know that you could speak!"

"If you are not afraid of me," the hen continued, "come with me now. Get dressed quickly!"

"You are funny, Blackie!" said Alyosha. "How can I get dressed in the dark? I won't be able to find my clothes. I can barely see you!"

"I will try to help," said the hen.

Then she clucked in a strange voice, and suddenly small candles in silver candlesticks, no larger than Alyosha's little finger, appeared from nowhere. There were candlesticks on the floor, the chairs, the windows, and even the wash-basin, and it became as light as day in the room. Alyosha began to get dressed, and the hen handed him his clothes, so he was soon fully dressed.

When Alyosha was ready, Blackie clucked again and the candles disappeared.

"Follow me!" she told him.

He followed her bravely. Beams seemed to come from her eyes and light up everything around them, although not as brightly as the small candles. They went through the hall.

"The door is locked," said Alyosha.

But the hen did not answer him: she flapped her wings, and the door opened by itself. Then they walked through the lobby and turned towards the rooms where the hundred-year-old Dutch ladies lived. Alyosha had never been there, but had heard that their rooms were furnished in old-fashioned style, and that one of them had a big grey parrot and the other a grey cat, a very clever one that could jump through a hoop and give its paw. He had always wanted to see all this, so he was very glad when the hen flapped her wings again and the old ladies' door opened.

In the first room Alyosha saw all sorts of old furniture: carved chairs, armchairs, tables and dressers. There was a big stove of Dutch tiles with people and animals painted on it in blue. Alyosha wanted to stop and look at the furniture, especially the figures on the stove, but Blackie would not let him.

They entered the second room, and Alyosha was delighted! In a splendid gold cage sat a big grey parrot with a red tail. Alyosha wanted to run up to it at once. Again Blackie would not let him.

"Don't touch anything here," she said. "Be sure not to wake the old ladies!"

Only then did Alyosha notice that beside the parrot was a bed with white muslin curtains, through which he could make out an old lady lying with eyes closed; she looked as if she were made of wax. In another corner was an identical bed where the other old lady was sleeping, and next to her sat a grey cat, washing itself with front paws. As he walked past, Alyosha just had to ask for its paw... It began to mew loudly, and the parrot raised its crest and squawked: "Silly fool!" He could see the old ladies sit up in bed behind the muslin curtains. Blackie ran away hastily, followed by Alyosha. The door slammed hard behind them... and for a long time they could hear the parrot squawking: "Silly fool! Silly fool!"

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" said Blackie, when they had left the old ladies' chambers. "You've probably woken the knights..."

"What knights?" asked Alyosha.

"You'll see," the hen replied. "Don't be afraid, though, it doesn't matter, follow me boldly."

They descended the staircase into a kind of cellar, and walked along various passages and corridors that Alyosha had never seen before. Sometimes the corridors were so low and narrow, that Alyosha had to bend down. Suddenly they entered a large hall lit by three large crystal chandeliers. The hall had no windows. Hanging on the walls on either side of it were knights wearing shining armour and plumed helmets and holding spears and shields.

Blackie walked ahead on tiptoe and told Alyosha to follow her very quietly.

At the end of the hall was a large door of bright yellow brass. No sooner had they gone up to it, than two knights jumped off the wall, banged their spears on their shields and made for the black hen. Blackie raised her crest, spread out her wings... and grew bigger and bigger, taller than the knights, and began to fight them. The knights pressed her hard, but she defended herself with her wings

and beak. Alyosha was very frightened, his heart trembled violently, and he fell into a faint.

When he came to the sun was shining through the shutters and he was lying in his bed. There was no sign of Blackie or the knights. Alyosha could not collect his thoughts for a long time. He did not know what had happened to him that night: had he dreamed it or had it really happened? He dressed and went upstairs, but could not forget what he had seen the night before. He waited impatiently for the time when he could go and play in the yard, but as luck would have it that day it was snowing hard and there could be no thought of going outside.

After dinner the schoolmaster's wife informed her husband, among other things, that the black hen was not to be seen.

"Never mind," she added, "it would not matter greatly if she did disappear: she's been down for the pot for a long time. Just imagine, my dear, she has not laid a single egg ever since we got her."

Alyosha nearly burst out crying, although it occurred to him that it would be better if she was not found, than if she ended up in the pot.

After dinner Alyosha remained alone in the classrooms again. He kept thinking about what had happened last night, and could not get over the loss of his beloved Blackie. Sometimes he felt sure he would see her the next night, although she had disappeared from the hen-house. But then he thought that was impossible, and his spirits sank again.

The time came to go to bed, and Alyosha undressed impatiently and lay down. No sooner did he look at the neighbouring bed, again bathed in pale moonlight, than the white sheet stirred as it had the day before... Again he heard a voice calling him: "Alyosha! Alyosha!" and a little later Blackie came out from under the bed and flew onto his bedclothes.

"Oh! Hello, Blackie!" he shouted, beside himself with joy. "I was afraid I would never see you again. Are you alright?"

"Yes," the hen replied, "but I had a narrow escape thanks to you."

"What do you mean, Blackie?" asked Alyosha, in alarm.

"You're a good boy," the hen continued, "but you're impetuous and never do what you are told straightaway, and that's bad. Yesterday I told you not to touch anything in the old ladies' rooms, but in spite of that you had to ask the cat for its paw. The cat woke the parrot, the parrot woke the old ladies, the old ladies woke the knights—and I only just managed to deal with them."

"I'm sorry, dear Blackie. I won't do it again! Please take me back today. I'll be good, you'll see."

"Alright," said the hen, "we'll see!"

The hen clucked as she had yesterday, and the same small candles appeared in the same silver candlesticks. Alyosha dressed and followed her. They again entered the old ladies' rooms, but this time he did not touch anything.

As they were passing through the first room, the people and animals painted on the stove seemed to be making funny faces and trying to attract his attention, but he deliberately turned away from them. In the second room the old Dutch ladies were lying in bed, as before, looking as if they were made of wax. The parrot looked at Alyosha and blinked, the grey cat was washing herself with her paws. On a table in front of a mirror Alyosha saw two Chinese porcelain dolls, which he had not noticed the day before. They were nodding to him; he remembered Blackie's instructions and walked past without stopping; but he could not resist bowing to them in passing. The dolls jumped off the table and ran after him, still nodding their heads. He was about to stop, for they seemed so amusing, but Blackie turned and gave him such an angry look that he thought better of it. The dolls accompanied them to the doors, and, seeing that Alyosha was not looking at them, returned to their places.

Again they descended the staircase, walked along passages and corridors and arrived at the hall, lit by three crystal chandeliers. The knights were hanging on the walls, and again, when they came

to the brass door, two knights came from the wall and blocked their way. But they did not look as angry as the day before; they could hardly drag themselves along, like flies in autumn, and they barely had the strength to hold their spears.

Blackie grew bigger and bigger and raised her crest. But as soon as she struck them with her wings, they fell to pieces, and Alyosha saw that they were empty suits of armour! The brass door opened by itself and they walked on.

A little later they entered another hall, large but so low that Alyosha could touch the ceiling. This hall was lit by the small candles he had seen in his room, but the candlesticks were gold, instead of silver.

Then Blackie left Alyosha.

"Stay here for a little while," she said to him, "I will be back soon. You were good today, although you were careless enough to bow to the porcelain dolls. If you had not bowed to them, the knights would have stayed on the wall. But you did not waken the old ladies today, and so the knights had no strength." After which Blackie left the hall.

Left alone, Alyosha began to study the hall, which was very richly furnished. He thought the walls were made of marble that he had seen in the mineral cabinet at school. The panelling and doors were of pure gold. At the end of the hall, under a green canopy, on a raised platform, stood a chair of gold. Alyosha admired this furnishing, but thought it strange that everything was so small, as if for tiny toys.

While he was examining everything curiously, a side door, which he had not noticed before, opened and in came a lot of tiny people, about a foot tall, in splendid clothes. They looked most impressive: judging by their attire, some were military men, others public officials. All of them wore round feathered hats that looked Spanish. They did not notice Alyosha, and promenaded solemnly up and down the rooms, talking loudly among themselves, but he could not understand what they were saying.

He watched them in silence for a long time and was about to go up and ask one of them a question, when the big door at the end of the hall opened . . . Everyone fell silent, lined up in double file by the walls and took off their hats.

In an instant the room grew brighter, the small candles burned brighter still, and Alyosha saw twenty small knights in gold armour, with crimson-plumed helmets, march quietly into the hall in pairs. They stood on either side of the chair in silence. A little later a man with regal bearing and a crown shining with precious stones on his head came into the hall. He wore a light-green mantle lined with mouse fur with a long train carried by twenty small pages in crimson suits.

Alyosha realised that this must be the king. He gave him a low bow. The King responded to his bow most graciously and sat down on the gold chair. Then he gave an order to one of the knights standing by him, who came up to Alyosha and told him to approach the chair. Alyosha obeyed.

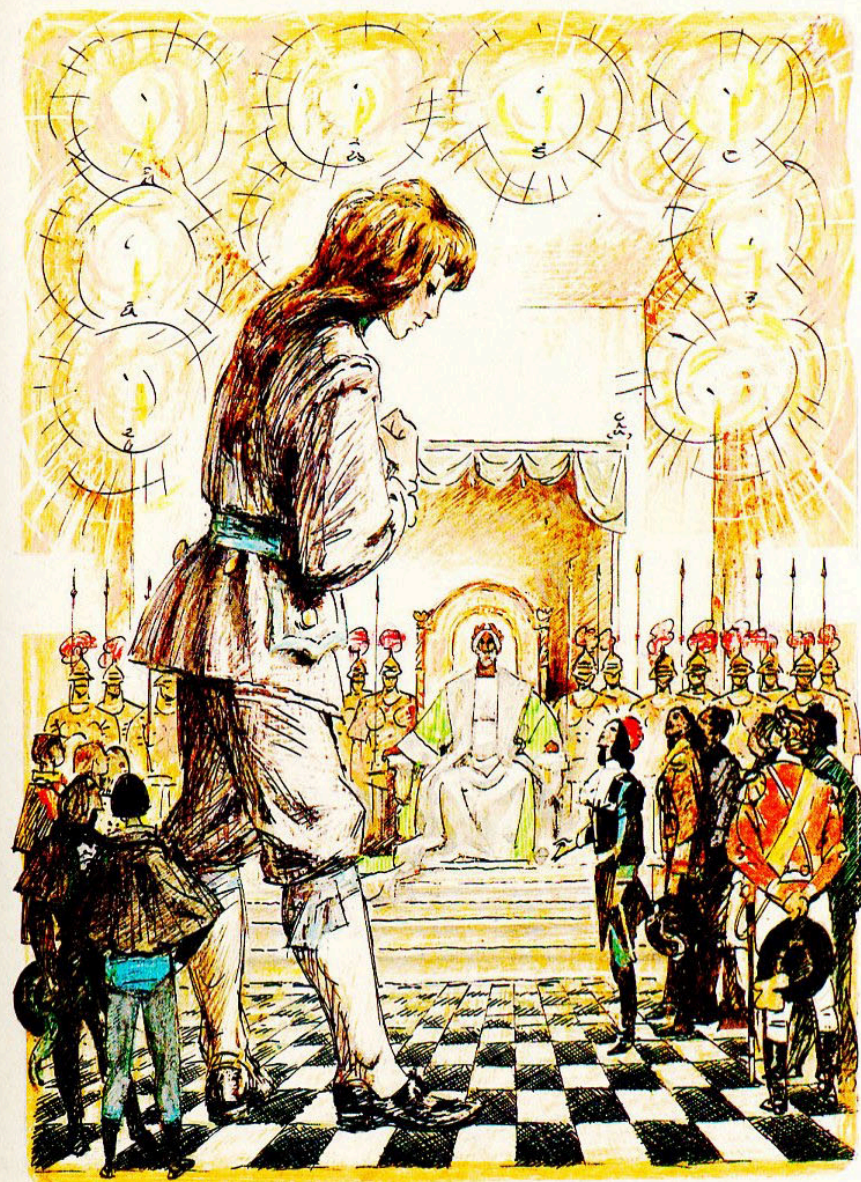
"I have known for some time," said the King, "that you are a good kind boy; but the day before yesterday you rendered a great service to my people and deserve a reward for it. My Head Minister has informed me that you saved him from a certain and cruel death."

"When?" asked Alyosha in surprise.

"The day before yesterday in the yard," replied the King. "Here is the man who owes his life to you."

Alyosha looked at the person whom the King had pointed out, and only then noticed that among the courtiers was a small man dressed all in black. On his head was a special kind of crimson cap, serrated on top, worn slightly to one side, and round his neck a white necktie, stiffly starched, which gave it a slightly bluish tinge. He smiled gratefully, as he looked at Alyosha, who thought his face familiar, but could not remember where he had seen it.

Although highly flattered at having such a noble action attributed to him, Alyosha loved the truth and therefore, bowing low, said:



"Sire! I cannot let myself be credited with something I have not done. The day before yesterday I had the good fortune to save from death not your minister, but our little black hen, whom the cook did not like because she had never laid a single egg..."

"What are you saying!" the King interrupted him angrily. "My minister is not a hen, but an honoured official!"

The Minister came closer, and Alyosha saw that it was indeed his dear Blackie. He was overjoyed and begged the King's pardon, although he could not understand what it all meant.

"Tell me what you would like," the King continued. "If it is within my power, I shall grant your request."

"Don't be afraid, Alyosha!" the Minister whispered in his ear.

Alyosha thought hard and did not know what to ask for. Had he been given more time, he might have thought of something good. But since he considered it discourteous to make the King wait, he gave a hasty reply.

"I wish," he said, "that I could always know the lessons I have been set without learning them."

"I did not think you were so lazy," the King replied, shaking his head. "But I must grant your wish nevertheless."

He waved his hand, and a page brought a gold plate on which lay a single hemp seed.

"Take this seed," said the King. "As long as you have it, you will always know whatever lesson has been set you, on the sole condition that you never, under the slightest pretext, say a single word about what you have seen or will see here. The slightest indiscretion will deprive you forever of our favour, and will cause us much trouble and unpleasantness."

Alyosha took the hemp seed, wrapped it in a piece of paper and put it in his pocket, promising to be silent and discreet. Whereupon the King rose from the armchair and left the hall with the same ceremony, after ordering the Minister to entertain Alyosha in the best possible style.

No sooner had the King retired, than all the courtiers crowded round Alyosha and made a fuss of him, expressing their gratitude

to him for saving the Minister. They all offered him their services: some asked if he would care to take a walk in the garden or look at the Royal Menagerie; others invited him to go hunting. Alyosha did not know what to choose. Finally the Minister announced that he himself would show the underground wonders to the dear guest.

First he took him into the garden. The paths were strewn with coloured stones that reflected the light of the countless small lanterns hanging on the trees. The shining pleased Alyosha greatly.

"These stones are what you call gems," said the Minister. "They are diamonds, rubies, emeralds and amethysts."

"Oh, I wish our paths were strewn with them!" Alyosha exclaimed.

"Then they would be of as little value to you as they are here," replied the Minister.

The trees also looked extremely beautiful to Alyosha, although very strange. They were of different colours: red, green, brown, white, blue and violet. Examining them carefully, he saw that they were actually different sorts of moss, only taller and thicker than usual. The Minister told him that the King had paid a lot of money to have this moss brought from far countries and from the very depths of the earth.

From the gardens they went into the menagerie. Here Alyosha was shown wild animals on gold chains. Inspecting them more closely, he found to his surprise that they were large rats, moles, ferrets and suchlike animals who live under the ground and the floor. He thought this most amusing, but said nothing out of courtesy.

Returning to the rooms after the walk, Alyosha found a table set with all manner of confitures, pies, pâté, and fruit in the big hall. The dishes were made of pure gold, and the goblets and glasses were fashioned from diamonds, rubies and emeralds.

"Eat what you like," said the Minister, "you are not allowed to take anything with you."

Alyosha had eaten a good supper that day, so he did not feel in the least hungry.

"You promised to take me hunting," he said.

"Very well," the Minister replied. "I think the horses are saddled."

He whistled and grooms came in, leading hobby horses with carved heads by the reins. The Minister jumped onto his horse with great agility. Alyosha was given a hobby horse much bigger than the rest.

"Mind the horse does not throw you," said the Minister, "she's not one of the quietest."

Alyosha smiled inwardly at this, but when he took the hobby horse between his legs, he saw that the Minister's advice was not in vain. The stick began to twist and turn under him like a real horse, and he only remained in the saddle with difficulty.

Meanwhile there was a fanfare of horns, and the hunters began to gallop at full speed down the passages and corridors. They galloped like this for some time, and Alyosha did not lag behind them, although he could only restrain his bucking stick with difficulty.

Suddenly some rats bigger than any Alyosha had ever seen sprang out of a side corridor. They wanted to run past, but when the Minister ordered them to be surrounded, they stopped and defended themselves bravely. In spite of this, however, they were vanquished by the courage and skill of the hunters. Eight rats lay on the ground, three were put to flight, and another, a rather badly wounded one, the Minister ordered to be treated and sent to the menagerie.

After the hunting Alyosha was so tired that his eyes kept closing. Notwithstanding this he had a lot to say to Blackie, and asked permission to return to the hall from which they had set out hunting. The Minister agreed.

They set off back at the gallop and arriving in the hall, handed the horses over to the grooms, bowed to the courtiers and hunters, and sat down next to each other on the chairs brought for them.

"Tell me, please," Alyosha began, "why did you kill the poor things who were not disturbing you and live so far from your dwellings?"

"If we had not destroyed them," said the Minister, "they would soon have driven us out of our abode and destroyed all our provisions. What is more, mouse and rat fur is very expensive here because it is light and soft. Only the nobility is allowed to wear it."

"And please tell me who you are," Alyosha continued.

"Haven't you ever heard that our people live under the ground?" replied the Minister. "True, few ever succeed in seeing us, but there have been cases, particularly in the old days, when we went out and showed ourselves to people. That rarely happens now, because people have grown very indiscreet. And we have a law that if the person to whom we have shown ourselves does not keep it a secret, we have to leave our abode at once and go far, far away, to other lands. As you can easily imagine, it would be most unpleasant for our King to leave all the establishments here and move to unknown lands with all the people. Therefore I would beg you most earnestly to be as discreet as possible. Otherwise you will make us all unhappy, particularly me. Out of gratitude I requested the King to summon you here; but he would never forgive me, if we are compelled to leave these parts because of your indiscretion..."

"I give you my word that I shall never speak of you to anyone," Alyosha interrupted him. "I have remembered now what I read in a book about gnomes who live under the earth. They say that in a certain town a shoemaker grew very rich in a short time, and no one could understand where his wealth came from. At last they found out that he made boots and shoes for gnomes who paid him most handsomely for it."

"It may be true," replied the Minister.

"But, tell me, dear Blackie," Alyosha asked him, "why did you, a minister, appear in the form of a hen and what connection do you have with the old Dutch ladies?"

Desiring to satisfy his curiosity, Blackie was about to relate much to him in detail, but as soon as she started Alyosha's eyes closed and he fell fast asleep. When he awoke next morning he was in his own bed.

For a long time he was confused and did not know what to think. Blackie and the Minister, the King and the knights, the Dutch ladies and the rats—everything was mixed up in his head, and he had difficulty in sorting out in his mind all that he had seen the night before. Remembering that the King had given him a hemp seed, he hurriedly ran to his suit and found in the pocket the piece of paper in which the hemp seed was wrapped. "Now we shall see if the King keeps his word!" he thought. "Lessons begin tomorrow, and I have not done all my homework yet."

The history lesson worried him in particular: he had been given several pages of history to learn by heart, and he did not know a single word!

Monday arrived, the pupils came back, and lessons began. The master of the boarding school himself taught history from ten to twelve.

Alyosha's heart was beating fast... Waiting for his turn, he fingered the piece of paper with the hemp seed several times in his pocket... Eventually he was called out. In fear and trembling he went up to the schoolmaster, opened his mouth, not knowing what to say, and recited all the pages straight off without a single mistake. The schoolmaster lavished him with praise; but Alyosha did not feel the same pleasure at his praise as he had felt before in similar situations. A voice inside him said that he did not deserve it, because he had not taken any pains to learn the lesson.

For several weeks the teachers could not praise Alyosha enough. All lessons without exception he knew perfectly, all his translations from one language into another were faultless, so that they could not help but marvel at his extraordinary prowess. Deep down Alyosha was ashamed of this praise: his conscience pricked him at being set up as an example to his classmates, when he did not deserve it.



All this time Blackie did not appear, in spite of the fact that Alyosha, particularly in the first few weeks after he received the hemp seed, let hardly a day pass without calling her when he went to bed. At first he was grieved by this, but then calmed down, thinking that she was probably engaged in some important business in keeping with her vocation. Later he found the praise lavished upon him so diverting that he remembered her only rarely.

Meanwhile rumours of his unusual abilities spread quickly all over St Petersburg. The inspector of the schools visited the school several times to admire Alyosha. The schoolmaster thought the earth of him, because he had made his school famous. Parents came from all over the town, begging him to take their children in the hope that they would be as clever as Alyosha.

Soon the school was so full that there was no room for new pupils, and the schoolmaster and his wife began to think about renting a more spacious house than the one in which they lived.

Alyosha, as I have already mentioned above, was ashamed of the praise at first, feeling that he did not deserve it, but gradually he grew accustomed to it, and eventually became so conceited that he accepted the praise lavished upon him without turning a hair. He began to think a lot of himself, showed off in front of the other boys and imagined that he was better and cleverer than all of them. As a result his character was quite spoiled: from a good, nice and modest boy he turned into an arrogant, disobedient one. His conscience often reproached him with this, and a voice inside him said: "Do not be proud, Alyosha! Do not attribute to yourself that which does not belong to you; thank fortune that it has given you advantages over the other children, but do not think that you are better than they. If you do not reform, no one will love you, and then you will be the unhappiest of children for all your erudition!"

Sometimes he made up his mind to reform; but, unfortunately, the conceit in him was so strong that it drowned the voice of conscience, and each day he grew worse, and each day his classmates liked him less.

What is more, Alyosha became terribly naughty. Having no need to learn the lessons he was set, he got up to all sorts of pranks when the other children were doing their homework, and this idleness spoilt his character even more.

Eventually everyone grew so tired of his bad behaviour, that the schoolmaster seriously began to consider ways of reforming the naughty boy and to this end set him lessons two or three times longer than the others; but this was not the slightest help. Alyosha did not study at all, but nevertheless knew the lesson from beginning to end perfectly.

One day, not knowing what to do with him, the schoolmaster told him to learn about twenty pages by heart for the next morning, hoping that this would keep him quiet.

Not a bit of it! Our Alyosha did not give a thought to the lesson. That day he was intentionally more naughty than usual, and the schoolmaster threatened him in vain with punishment if he did not know the lesson next morning. Alyosha smiled to himself at these threats, sure that the hemp seed would help him.

The next day, at the appointed time, the schoolmaster picked up the book from which Alyosha had to learn the lesson, called him out and told him to recite it. The children watched Alyosha expectantly and the schoolmaster himself did not know what to think when Alyosha, in spite of the fact that he had not learnt the lesson the day before, rose boldly from his seat and went up to him. Alyosha did not doubt in the slightest that this time too he would be able to show his unusual ability; he opened his mouth... and could not say a word!

"Why are you silent?" the schoolmaster said to him. "Recite the lesson!"

Alyosha blushed, then turned pale, then blushed again. He began to wring his hands and tears of fear welled up in his eyes... all in vain! He could not utter a single word, because he had relied on the hemp seed and not even glanced at the book.

"What does this mean, Alyosha?" the schoolmaster shouted. "Why won't you speak?"

Alyosha himself did not know the reason for this strange event. He put his hand into his pocket to feel the seed . . . But imagine his despair when he did not find it! The tears streamed from his eyes . . . he wept bitterly, but still could not say a word.

Meanwhile the schoolmaster had lost his patience. Accustomed to the fact that Alyosha always replied correctly without hesitation, he thought it impossible that the boy did not know at least the beginning of the lesson, and therefore put his silence down to obstinacy.

"Go to the dormitory," he said, "and stay there until you know the lesson perfectly."

Alyosha was taken to the lower storey, given the book and locked in.

As soon as he was left alone, he started to search for the hemp seed. He rummaged about for a long time in his pockets, crawled round the floor, looked under the bed, shook the blanket, pillows and sheet—all in vain! There was no trace of the precious seed anywhere! He tried to remember where he might have lost it, and eventually decided that he had dropped it the evening before when he was playing in the yard.

But how was he to find it? He was locked in the room, and even if they did let him into the yard, that would probably not help, for he knew that hens are fond of hemp seeds and one of them had probably managed to peck it up! Despairing of finding it, he thought of calling Blackie to his aid.

"Dear Blackie!" he said. "Dear Minister! Please come to me and give me another seed! I really will be more careful in future!"

But no one answered his request, and eventually he sat down on a chair and began to cry bitterly.

Meanwhile it was time for lunch; the door opened, and the schoolmaster entered.

"Do you know the lesson now?" he asked Alyosha.

Sobbing loudly, Alyosha was compelled to say that he did not know it.

"Then stay here until you do!" said the schoolmaster. He ordered the boy to be given a glass of water and a piece of rye bread and left him on his own.

Alyosha began to learn the lesson, but nothing would stay in his head. He had long since grown unaccustomed to studying, and in any case it was twenty printed pages! No matter how he tried, no matter how he strained his memory, when evening came he did not know more than two or three pages, and that badly.

When it was time for the other children to go to bed, his schoolmates rushed into the room at once, and with them came the schoolmaster again.

"Alyosha! Do you know the lesson?" he asked.

And poor Alyosha replied tearfully:

"Only two pages."

"I see. Then tomorrow you will have to stay here with bread and water again," said the schoolmaster. Bidding the other children good-night, he went out.

Alyosha was left with his schoolmates. When he had been good and modest, everyone had liked him, and if he were punished, they were sorry for him, and this comforted him. But now no one paid any attention to him: everyone looked at him scornfully and did not say a word to him.

He decided to strike up a conversation with a boy with whom he had once been very friendly, but the boy turned his back on him without replying. Alyosha addressed another boy, who did not want to talk to him either and even pushed him away, when he said something else to him. Then the wretched Alyosha realised that he deserved to be treated like this by his schoolmates. Bursting into tears, he went to bed, but could not get to sleep. He lay like this for a long time, sadly recalling happy days in the past. All the children were sleeping sweetly, only he could not get to sleep. "Blackie has deserted me too," thought Alyosha, and the tears welled up again in his eyes.

Suddenly . . . the sheet on the next bed stirred, as it had on that first day, when the black hen appeared to him.

His heart began to beat faster . . . he wanted Blackie to come out from under the bed, but dared not hope that his wish would come true.

"Blackie! Blackie!" he whispered finally.

The sheet lifted slightly, and the black hen flew up onto his bed.

"Oh, Blackie!" said Alyosha, beside himself with joy. "I dared not hope that I would see you! Have you forgotten me?"

"No," she replied, "I could not forget the service you did me, although the Alyosha who saved me from death was not at all like the one I see before me now. You were a good boy then, modest and courteous, and everyone loved you, but now . . . I cannot recognise you!"

Alyosha wept bitterly, but Blackie continued to give him advice. She spoke to him for a long time and begged him tearfully to reform. Finally, when day began to break, the hen said to him:

"Now I must leave you, Alyosha! Here is the hemp seed you dropped in the yard. You were wrong to think that it was lost forever. Our King is far too generous to take this gift away from you for your carelessness. But remember that you gave your word to keep secret everything that you know about us . . . Do not add to your present bad qualities the even worse one of ingratitude, Alyosha!"

Alyosha took his precious seed from the hen's claws in delight and promised to do his best to reform.

"You'll see, dear Blackie," he said, "I shall be quite different even today."

"Do not think that it is easy to throw off bad habits once they have got a hold on you. Bad habits usually come in through the door, and go out through a crack, so if you want to reform, you must be strict with yourself all the while. But farewell, it is time for us to part!"

Left alone, Alyosha began to examine his hemp seed and could not feast his eyes on it enough. Now he was perfectly confident about the lesson, and his grief of yesterday had left no mark on him.

He imagined happily how surprised everyone would be when he recited the twenty pages without a mistake, and the thought that he would again gain the upper hand over his schoolmates, who refused to talk to him, flattered his pride. He did not exactly forget about reforming, but thought it could not be as hard as Blackie said. "As if it did not depend on me to reform!" he thought. "I only need to want it, and everyone will like me again." Alas, poor Alyosha did not know that to reform you must begin by getting rid of conceit and excessive self-reliance.

When the children assembled in the classrooms next morning, Alyosha was summoned upstairs. He entered with a gay and triumphant air.

"Do you know your lesson?" asked the schoolmaster, looking at him sternly.

"Yes, I do," Alyosha replied boldly.

He recited the whole twenty pages without the slightest mistake or hesitation. The schoolmaster was beside himself with amazement, and Alyosha stared boldly at his schoolmates.

Alyosha's proud air did not escape the schoolmaster's eye.

"You know your lesson," he said to him, "that is true, but why did you not want to say it yesterday?"

"I did not know it yesterday," Alyosha replied.

"Impossible!" the schoolmaster interrupted him. "Yesterday evening you told me you knew only two pages, and that badly, but now you have recited all twenty without a mistake! When did you learn it?"

Alyosha kept silent. Finally he said in a trembling voice:

"I learnt it this morning!"

But then the children, stung by his arrogance, cried out in unison:

"He's not telling the truth. He did not look at the book this morning."

Alyosha shuddered, cast his eyes to the ground and said nothing.

"Answer me!" the schoolmaster continued. "When did you learn the lesson?"

But Alyosha remained silent: he was so taken aback by the unexpected question and the ill-will that his schoolmates had shown him, that he could not collect his thoughts.

Meanwhile, assuming that he had refused to recite the lesson the day before out of obstinacy, the schoolmaster deemed it necessary to punish him severely.

"The more abilities and talents you have from nature," he said to Alyosha, "the more discreet and obedient you should be. You have not been given a mind to abuse it. You deserve to be punished for your obstinacy yesterday, yet today you have increased your guilt by lying. Gentlemen!" the schoolmaster continued, turning to the schoolboys. "I forbid you to speak to Alyosha until he has completely reformed. And since that is probably a minor punishment for him, get them to bring the birch."

They brought the birch... Alyosha was in despair! This was the first time since the school was founded that someone had been punished with the birch, and who—Alyosha, who had such a high opinion of himself, who thought himself better and cleverer than anyone else! How humiliating!

He rushed up to the schoolmaster, sobbing, and promised to reform completely.

"You should have thought of that before," was the reply.

Alyosha's tears and repentance moved his schoolmates, and they began to intercede for him. But Alyosha, feeling that he did not deserve their compassion, cried even more bitterly.

"Very well!" said the schoolmaster, finally. "I forgive you at the request of your schoolmates, but on condition that you acknowledge your guilt before everyone and explain when you learnt the lesson."

Alyosha lost his head completely... he forgot his promise to the underground king and his minister, and began to tell them about the black hen, the knights, the little people...

The schoolmaster did not let him finish.

"What!" he cried, angrily. "Instead of being sorry for your bad behaviour, you try to make me look a fool by telling a story about

a black hen? That is too much. No, children, you see for yourselves that he must be punished!"

So poor Alyosha was birched.

Head hanging, Alyosha went downstairs to the dormitories. He was stupefied. Shame and repentance filled his heart. When a few hours later he quietened down somewhat and put his hand in his pocket... the hemp seed was not there. Alyosha burst into tears, sensing that he had lost it forever.

That evening, when the other children came to bed, he too went to bed, but could not get to sleep. How he repented of his bad behaviour! He resolved firmly to reform, although he realised it was impossible to get the hemp seed back.

Around midnight the sheet on the next bed stirred again... Alyosha, who had been overjoyed at this the night before, now closed his eyes: he was afraid of seeing Blackie! His conscience tormented him. Only yesterday he had told Blackie so confidently that he would reform, and instead of that... What was he to tell her now?

For a while he lay with his eyes closed. He heard the rustle of the lifting sheet... Someone came up to the bed, and a voice, a familiar voice, called his name:

"Alyosha! Alyosha!"

But he was ashamed to open his eyes, and meanwhile the tears were falling from them and trickling down his cheeks.

Suddenly someone tugged at the blanket. Alyosha looked up with a start: in front of him stood Blackie, not in the form of a hen, but in the black robe, with the crimson cap and the white starched neck-tie, just as he had seen her in the underground hall.

"Alyosha!" said the Minister, "I can see that you are not asleep. Goodbye! I have come to bid you farewell. We shall never meet again!"

Alyosha sobbed loudly.

"Goodbye!" he exclaimed. "Goodbye! And forgive me, if you can. I know I have done you wrong."

"Alyosha!" said the Minister tearfully. "I forgive you; I cannot forget that you saved my life, and I still love you, although you have made me unhappy, perhaps forever! Goodbye! I have been allowed to see you for a short time only. This very night the King and his people are to move far away from here! Everyone is in despair, they are all weeping. We lived here for centuries so happily, so peacefully!"

Alyosha kissed the Minister's small hands. As he caught hold of one hand, he saw something shining on it and heard a strange sound.

"What is that?" he asked in surprise.

The Minister raised both hands, and Alyosha saw that they were bound by a gold chain. He was horrified.

"Your indiscretion is the reason why I have been sentenced to wear these chains," said the Minister with a deep sigh, "but do not cry, Alyosha! Your tears cannot help me. You alone can comfort me in my misfortune: try to reform and be the same nice boy you were before. Goodbye for the last time!"

The Minister pressed Alyosha's hand and disappeared under the next bed.

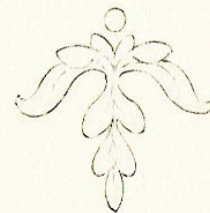
"Blackie! Blackie!" Alyosha cried after him, but Blackie did not reply.

He did not sleep a wink all night. An hour before sunrise he heard sounds under the floor. He got out of bed, put his ear to the floor and listened for a long time to the clatter of small wheels and the sound of lots of little people walking past down below. This sound was mingled with the weeping of women and children and the voice of Minister Blackie, which shouted to him:

"Farewell, Alyosha! Farewell forever!"

The next morning when they awoke the children saw Alyosha lying unconscious on the floor. They picked him up, put him to bed and called for the doctor, who announced that he had a high temperature.

Some six weeks later Alyosha recovered, and all that had happened to him before his illness seemed like a bad dream. Neither the schoolmaster nor his schoolmates said a word to him about the black hen or about the punishment that he had received. Alyosha himself was ashamed to speak of it and strove to be obedient, good, modest and diligent. Everyone began to like him and be nice to him again, and he became an example to his schoolmates, although he could no longer learn twenty printed pages by heart, which, incidentally, he was not asked to do either.





*Vladimir Odoyevsky*

## THE TOWN IN THE SNUFF-BOX



Father placed the snuff-box on the table.

"Come and look at this, Misha," he said.

Misha was an obedient little boy; he left his toys at once and went up to his father. It was well worth a look! What a splendid snuff-box! Made of bright tortoise-shell. And see what was on the lid! Gates, turrets, a tiny house this, that and the other—dozens of them, all as minute as could be and all made of gold; the trees were gold, too, but their leaves

were silver; behind the trees the sun was rising and its pink beams spread right across the sky.

"What town is it?" Misha sked.

"It's the town of Ding-Ding," his father replied, touching a spring...

And then what happened? Suddenly music began to play. Misha could not make out where it was coming from: he went up to the doors—was it from the other room? Then to the clock—perhaps it was in the clock? Then to the bureau, and to the cabinet: he listened here, he listened there; he even peeped under the table... Finally Misha was sure that the music was playing in the snuff-box. He went up to it; he saw the sun rise from behind the trees and steal quietly over the sky, while the sky and the town grew lighter and lighter; the windows shone brightly and the turrets seemed to be glowing. Then the sun crossed the sky to the other side, sank lower and lower, and finally disappeared behind a little hill. The town grew dark, the shutters closed, and the turrets faded, but not for long. A star lit up, then another, and then a crescent moon peeped out from behind the trees, and the town grew bright again, the windows gleamed with silver, and the turrets gave off a bluish light.

"Papa! Papa! Can't I go into the town? I'd like to so much!"

"How can you, my boy: the town is not your height."

"That doesn't matter, Papa, I'm very small; do let me go there: I'd love to know what's going on in there..."

"It's full enough without you, my boy."

"But who lives there?"

"Who lives there? The little bells."

So saying his father lifted the lid of the snuff-box, and what did Misha see? Little bells, hammers, a cylinder, and wheels... Misha was surprised.

"What are the little bells for? And the hammers? And the cylinder with the hooks?" Misha asked his father.

And his father replied:

"I won't tell you, Misha; you have a good look and think hard:

perhaps you will be able to guess. Only do not touch this spring, or everything will break."

His father went out of the room, and Misha was left with the snuff-box. He sat over it for a long time, looking carefully and thinking hard: what made the bells ring?

Meanwhile the music went on playing, but grew quieter and quieter, as if something were clinging to each note, pushing each sound away from the others. Misha watched: at the bottom of the snuff-box a little door opened and out ran a boy with a little gold head in a steel skirt. He stopped on the threshold and beckoned to Misha.

"Why did Papa say the town was full enough without me?" thought Misha. "The people who live there must be nice; see, they're inviting me to visit them."

"If you like, with the greatest of pleasure!"

Misha ran to the door and noticed with surprise that it was exactly his height. As a well-mannered boy, he considered it his duty to first address his escort.

"Kindly tell me," Misha said, "with whom I have the honour of speaking."

"Ding-ding-ding," the stranger replied, "I am a boy bell who lives in this town. We heard that you wanted very much to visit us, so we decided to invite you to be our guest. Ding-ding-ding, ding-ding-ding!"

Misha bowed courteously; the boy bell took him by the hand, and off they went. Then Misha noticed that above them there was a vault made of gay embossed paper with golden edges. In front of them was another vault, only smaller; then a third, smaller still; a fourth, smaller than the third, and so on with all the other vaults. The further away, the smaller they were, so that the last one seemed hardly big enough for the tiny head of his escort.

"I am very grateful to you for your invitation," Misha said to him, "but I do not know whether I can take advantage of it. I can get through here easily, true, but see what low vaults there are further

on; I tell you quite honestly I could not get through them even if I crawled. I am surprised that you can."

"Ding-ding-ding!" the boy replied. "Come along, do not worry, just follow me."

Misha did as he was told. And indeed, with each step the vaults seemed to go higher, and the boys passed through easily; when they reached the last vault, the boy bell asked Misha to look back. Misha did so, and what did he see? Now the first vault, under which he had passed when he came in, looked very small, as if it had sunk down while they were walking. Misha was very surprised.

"How did that happen?" he asked his escort.

"Ding-ding-ding!" his escort replied, laughing. "Things always look like that at a distance; it is obvious that you have never observed anything carefully from a distance; from a distance everything looks small, but when you come nearer it is bigger."

"Yes, that is true," Misha replied. "I had never thought about it before, so this is what happened to me: the day before yesterday I wanted to draw Mama playing the piano next to me, and Papa reading a book at the other end of the room. But I could not get it right: I tried ever so hard, drawing as carefully as I could, but I kept getting Papa sitting next to Mama and his armchair standing next to the piano, although I could see perfectly well that the piano was near me at the window, and Papa was sitting at the other end, by the fireplace. Mama told me that I should draw Papa small, and I thought she was joking, because Papa is much taller than her; but now I see that Mama was right: I should have drawn Papa small, because he was sitting further away. I am most grateful to you for the explanation, most grateful."

The boy bell laughed with all his might: "Ding-ding-ding, how funny! Ding-ding-ding, how funny! Not to be able to draw Papa and Mama! Ding-ding-ding, ding-ding-ding!"

Misha was annoyed at the boy bell laughing at him so pitilessly and said to him very politely:

"Pray let me ask you: why do you always say 'ding-ding-ding' with every word?"

"That's a catchword of ours," the boy bell replied.

"A catchword?" Misha remarked. "Well, my Papa says it isn't good to get used to catchwords."

The boy bell bit his lips and did not utter another word.

Before them were more doors; they opened, and Misha found himself in a street. What a street! What a town! The streets were paved with mother-of-pearl; the sky was shining tortoise-shell; over the sky moved a gold sun; if you beckoned to it, it would leave the sky, revolve round your hand, then start rising again. The tiny houses were made of polished steel and faced with different coloured shells, and under each roof sat a boy bell with a gold head and a silver skirt, lots and lots of them, each one smaller than the next.

"No, I won't be deceived now," said Misha, "it only looks like that from a distance. The bells are really all the same size."

"No, you're wrong," his escort replied, "the bells are not all the same size. If we were all the same size, we would all give the same ring, one like the next; but can't you hear the songs we make? That is because the bigger ones have a deeper voice. Didn't you know that? See, Misha, that will teach you a lesson: in future do not laugh at people who use catchwords; sometimes such a person knows more than others, and you can learn something from him."

It was Misha's turn to bite his tongue.

Meanwhile they had been surrounded by boy bells, who plucked at Misha's clothes, rang, jumped and ran about.

"You do have a jolly time," Misha said to them. "I should like to stay with you forever: you don't do anything all day; you have no lessons and no teacher, just music all day."

"Ding-ding-ding!" cried the bells. "So you think we have a jolly time! No, Misha, our life is not a happy one. It is true that we have no lessons, but what is so good about that? We would not mind having lessons! Our trouble is that we have nothing to do; we have no books, no pictures; no father or mother; nothing to occupy us; we just play and play all day, Misha, and that is very, very boring. Don't you believe us? Our tortoise-shell sky is very nice, so are the sun and the gold trees; but we have had enough of them, and we are

bored by it all; we never take a step out of the town, and you can imagine what it must be like to stay in a snuff-box all the time, doing nothing, even if it is a musical snuff-box."

"Yes," Misha replied, "you are right. That happens to me too: when you start playing with your toys after lessons it is very nice; but when you play all day long on a holiday, it gets boring by the evening; you pick up this toy, then that, and none of them are any fun. I could not understand why that was, but now I see."

"Yes, and what's more we have another worry, Misha: the uncles."

"What uncles?" Misha asked.

"The uncle hammers," the bells replied. "They're so nasty! Always strutting round the town and hitting us. The bigger bells don't get knocked about so much, but the little ones have it all the time."

And indeed Misha saw same gentlemen with thin legs and long noses walking along the street, whispering to themselves: "Biff-biff-biff! Biff-biff-biff! Knock-knock-knock! Lift up! Catch on! Knock-knock-knock! Knock-knock-knock!"

And the hammer uncles really were knocking the bells all the time, first this one, then that, and even poor Misha felt sorry for them. He went up to the gentlemen, greeted them very courteously, and asked politely why they were beating the poor boys so pitilessly. But the hammers replied:

"Be off with you, oh, leave us, do! Over there the overseer is lying down in his dressing gown, and tells us to knock. He turns and hooks, turns and hooks. Knock-knock-knock! Knock-knock-knock!"

"Who is your overseer?" Misha asked the bells.

"Mister Cylinder," they rang out, "a very kind man, who lies on the sofa day or night; we can't complain about him."

Misha went to the overseer. He really was lying on a sofa in his dressing gown tossing from side to side, but always with his face upwards. And all his dressing gown was studded with hundreds of little pins, hooks; whenever a hammer appeared he would hook it, then let it go, and the hammer knocked a bell.

As soon as Misha came up, the overseer cried:

"Hanky-panky! Who's that walking? Who's that talking? Hanky-panky! Who won't be off? Won't let me sleep? Hanky-panky, hanky-panky!"

"It's me," Misha replied, bravely, "I'm Misha..."

"And what do you want, pray?" asked the overseer.

"I'm sorry for the poor bell boys, they are all so clever, and so kind, and so musical, but you make the uncles knock them all the time..."

"What's that got to do with me, hanky-panky! I'm not the boss here. Let the uncles knock the boys! What do I care! I'm a nice overseer, I just lie on the sofa and don't watch anyone. Hanky-panky, hanky-panky..."

"Well, I have learnt a lot in this town!" Misha said to himself. "Sometimes I get annoyed because the form-master always keeps an eye on me. 'The nasty man!' I think. 'After all, he's not my Papa or Mama; what does it matter to him if I am naughty? If I'd known, I would have stayed in my room.' But now I can see what happens to poor boys when no one keeps an eye on them."

Meanwhile Misha walked on, then stopped. In front of him was a gold tent with a fringe of pearls: a gold weather vane on top turned like a wind mill, and under the canopy lay Queen Spring, like a snake, coiling and uncoiling, and forever prodding the overseer in the side. Misha was very surprised at this and said to her:

"Your Majesty! Why do you keep prodding the overseer in the side?"

"Zing-zing-zing," the Queen replied. "You're a silly boy, a foolish boy! You look at everything and see nothing! If I did not prod the cylinder, the cylinder would not go round; and if the cylinder did not go round, it would not hook the hammers, and the hammers would not knock; and if the hammers did not knock, the bells would not ring; and if the bells did not ring, there would be no music! Zing-zing-zing."

Misha wanted to find out if the Queen was telling the truth. He bent over and pressed her with his finger—and then what happened? In a flash the spring uncoiled, the cylinder whizzed round, the hammers knocked, the little bells began to ring nonsense and the spring broke. Everything went quiet, the cylinder stopped, the hammers dropped, the bells swung to one side, the sun dropped, the houses broke... Then Misha remembered that his father had told him not to touch the spring, he grew frightened and... woke up.

"What did you dream about, Misha?" asked Papa.

For a long time Misha did not know what had happened. He looked around—it was Father's room, and there in front of him was the snuff-box; Papa and Mama were sitting next to him, and laughing.

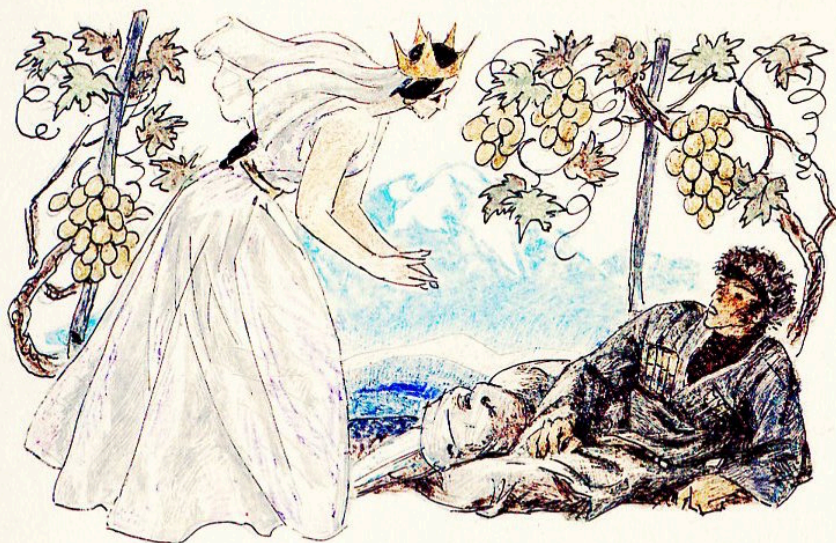
"Where is the bell boy? And the hammer uncle? And Queen Spring?" Misha asked. "So it was a dream, was it?"

"Yes, Misha, the music lulled you to sleep, and you dozed here for quite a while. Do at least tell us what you dreamed?"

"Well, you see, Papa," Misha said, rubbing his eyes, "I wanted to find out what made the music play in the snuff-box; so I looked at it carefully and tried to work out what moved in it and why; I was just beginning to understand it, when I saw the door in the snuff-box opening..." And Misha described all his dream in the right order.

"Well, I can see that you really did almost find out what makes the music play in the snuff-box," said Papa, "but you will understand it even better when you study mechanics."

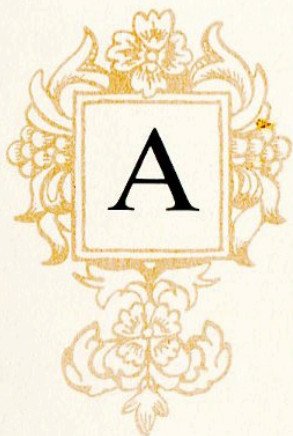




*Mikhail Lermontov*

## ASHEEK-KERIB

A Story from Turkey



A long, long time ago, in the town of Tiflis, lived a very rich Turk; Allah had given him much gold, but dearer than gold to him was his only daughter Magul-Megeri: the stars in the sky are beautiful but behind the stars live the angels, and they are still more beautiful. Even so was Magul-Megeri more beautiful than all the maidens of Tiflis. Also living in Tiflis was a certain poor man—Asheek-Kerib; the prophet had given him nothing but

a noble heart—and the gift of song. He would play on the saaz at the wedding-feasts of the rich and fortunate and sing the glories of the old heroes of Turkestan; at one such feast he set eyes on Magul-Megeri and they fell in love with one another. Little hope had poor Asheek-Kerib of ever winning her hand and he became as sorrowful as the sky in winter.

One day he was lying out in a garden under a grape vine and had at last managed to get off to sleep; just then Magul-Megeri happened to be passing with some of her friends; one of them, seeing the sleeping Asheek (which means simply a minstrel, one who plays the saaz), dropped behind the others and went up to him: “Why are you sleeping under that vine?” she sang. “Get up, you madman, your gazelle is passing!” He woke up—the girl fluttered away, quick as a bird; Magul-Megeri heard her song and began to scold her. “If only you knew,” her friend answered, “who it was that I was singing that song to, you would have said thank you: it was your Asheek-Kerib.” “Take me to him,” said Magul-Megeri; and off they went. When she saw his sad face, Magul-Megeri began to put all kinds of questions to him and to comfort him. “How can I help being sad,” replied Asheek-Kerib, “I love you and you will never be mine.” “Ask my father for my hand,” she said, “and my father will pay for our wedding feast with his own money and will give me such a dowry as will suffice for us both.” “All right,” he answered, “let us assume that Ayak-Aga will spare nothing for the happiness of his daughter; but who knows that afterwards you will not reproach me that I had nothing and owe everything to you;—no, dear Magul-Megeri; I have set myself a task; I promise to wander the earth for seven years and either to make my fortune or to perish in the deserts far away; if you agree to this then, when the time is fulfilled, you will be mine.” She agreed, but added that if he did not return on the day agreed, she would wed Kurshud-Bek, who had long sought her hand.

Asheek-Kerib went to his mother; he received her blessing on his journey, kissed his little sister, slung a pack over his shoulder, took a staff in his hand to lean on and left the town of Tiflis. Then a horseman overtook him. He looked up—and it was Kurshud-Bek.

"A good journey to you," called Kurshud-Bek, "wherever you go, wanderer, I will be your companion." Asheek was not best pleased with this companion but there was nothing he could do about it; for a long time they continued on their way together, then they saw before them a river. There was neither bridge nor ford. "Swim on," said Kurshud-Bek, "I will come after you." Asheek took off his upper garment and swam; having reached the other side he looked back and—oh sorrow! Oh Almighty Allah! Kurshud-Bek, having taken his robe, was galloping back in the direction of Tiflis, dust rising behind him in a long serpentine trail over the level plain. When he reached Tiflis, Kurshud-Bek took Asheek-Kerib's robe to his old mother. "Your son has drowned in a deep river," he said. "Here is his robe." In inexpressible distress, the mother fell on the clothing of her beloved son and began to shed bitter tears upon it; then she took the robe and carried it to her daughter-in-law elect, Magul-Megeri. "My son has drowned," she told her. "Kurshud-Bek has brought back his clothing; you are free." Magul-Megeri smiled and replied: "Don't you believe it, it's all invented by that Kurshud-Bek: before seven years have passed no one shall be my husband." She took her saaz down from the wall and calmly began to sing poor Asheek-Kerib's favourite song.

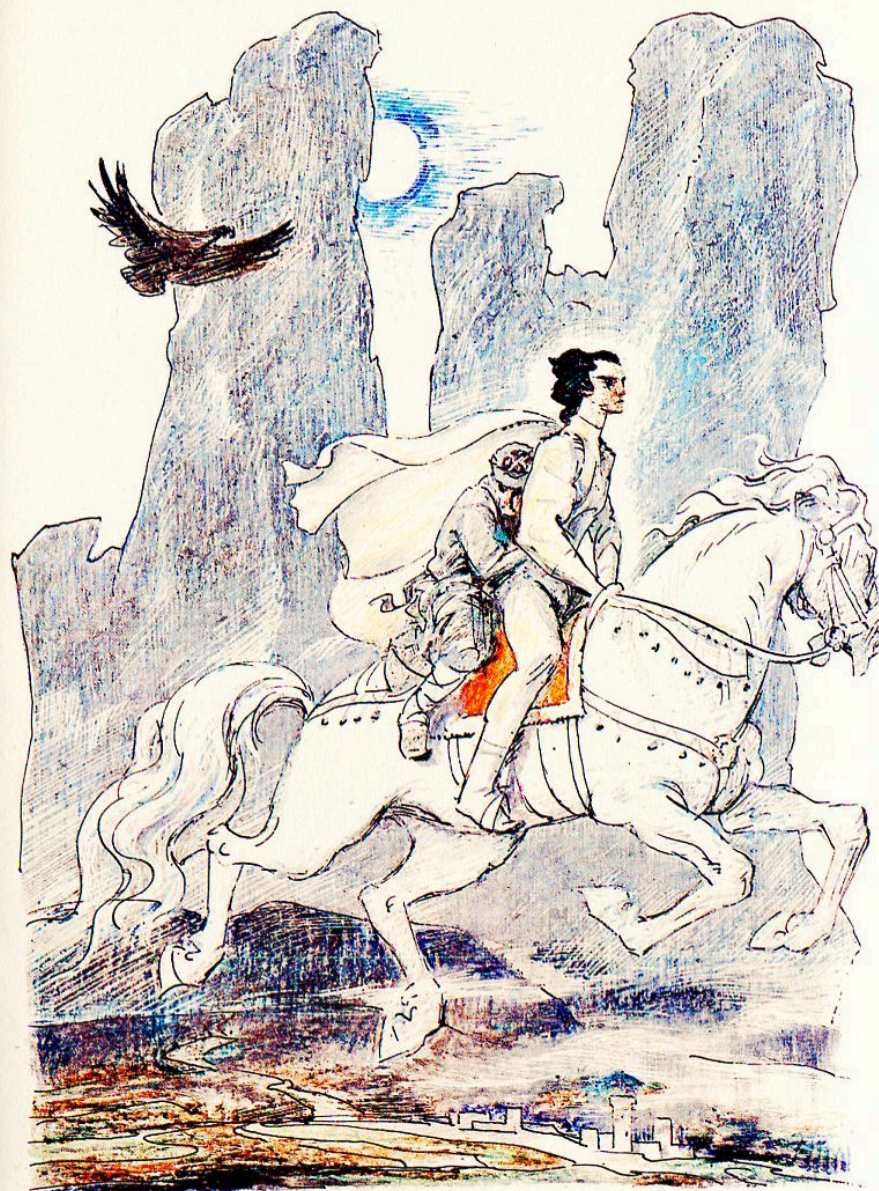
In the meantime the wanderer had arrived naked and barefoot at a certain village; kind people clothed and fed him; in return he sang them wonderful songs. In this way he travelled on from village to village, from town to town, and his reputation grew and went on before him. At length he arrived in Halaf; as was his custom he first visited the coffee-house, asked for a saaz and began to sing. Now at this time there was a Pasha living in Halaf, a great amateur of minstrels; many were brought to him—but none pleased him; his chaushi\* were quite exhausted with looking through the town; suddenly, as they were passing the coffee-house, they heard a remarkable voice; they rushed in— "Come with us to the Great Pasha," they shouted, "or we will have your head from your shoul-

\* Junior rank in Turkish army.—Ed.

ders." "I am a free man, a wanderer from the city of Tiflis," said Asheek-Kerib, "I go where I will and where I will not, there I do not go; I sing when the spirit moves me and your Pasha's no master of mine." However, in spite of all this he was seized and borne off to the Pasha. "Sing," said the Pasha, and he opened his mouth and sang. And in this song he praised his beloved Magul-Megeri; and the song pleased the proud Pasha so much that he asked poor Asheek-Kerib to stay with him. He showered him with silver and gold, his rich garments gleamed as he moved; merry and fortunate was the life of Asheek-Kerib and he became exceedingly rich; whether or not it was that he had forgotten all about his Magul-Megeri, the time he had set himself was running out and he was not even preparing to leave. The beautiful Magul-Megeri fell into despair; at this same time a certain merchant was about to set forth from Tiflis with forty camels and eighty slaves.

She called the merchant to her and presented him with a golden dish. "Take this dish," she said, "and display it in your stall in every town that you come to; then let it be proclaimed everywhere that whoever admits ownership of my dish and proves his claim may have it and its weight in gold into the bargain." The merchant set off on his travels and everywhere he went he did as Magul-Megeri had asked him, but none admitted ownership of the dish. He had sold almost all his goods when he arrived with the remainder in Halaf: here too he proclaimed what Magul-Megeri had bidden him throughout the town. When Asheek-Kerib heard this he came quickly to the caravanserai: and there he saw the golden dish in the stall of the merchant from Tiflis. "That is mine," he said seizing it with one hand. "It is yours indeed," said the merchant. "I recognise you, Asheek-Kerib: get you to Tiflis as quick as you can: your Magul-Megeri told me to tell you that the time is running out and if you are not there on the day agreed she will marry another." In despair Asheek-Kerib took his head in his hands: only three days remained until the fateful hour. Nevertheless he mounted his horse, took with him a considerable sum in gold coinage and galloped off not sparing his horse. Finally the exhausted beast fell winded on the

mount of Arzingan that is between Arzinyan and Arzerum. What was he to do: from Arzinyan to Tiflis was a two months' journey and there were only two days left. "Almighty Allah," he cried, "if you do not help me now, then there is nothing left for me on this earth." He wanted to throw himself from a high cliff; suddenly he saw at the bottom of the cliff a man on a white horse and heard a resonant shout: "Hey there, what are you trying to do?" "I'm trying to kill myself," answered Asheek. "Come down here, if that's how things are, and I'll kill you." Asheek climbed down. "Come with me," said the mounted man threateningly. "How can I keep up with you?" asked Asheek. "Your horse flies like the wind and I am weighed down by my pack."—"True; hang your bag on my saddle and follow me." Asheek-Kerib did his best to run but nevertheless began to lag behind. "Why can't you keep up?" asked the horseman. "How can I keep up with you? Your horse runs swifter than thought and I am already exhausted."—"True. Sit behind me on my horse and tell me the truth, where you wish to go."—"If I could even get as far as Arzerum today," answered Asheek. "Shut your eyes, then." He shut them. "Now open them." Asheek opened his eyes and looked. There before him shone the white walls and the minarets of Arzerum. "I beg your pardon, Aga," said Asheek. "I made a mistake. I meant to say that I should like to be in Kars."—"There you are then," the mounted man replied. "I warned you to tell me the real truth; shut your eyes again. Now open them." Asheek could not believe the evidence of his own senses: that it really was Kars. He fell on his knees and said: "I have behaved very wrongly, Aga. Your servant Asheek is three times in the wrong: but you know yourself that if a man makes up his mind to tell lies in the morning he is obliged to go on lying till the end of the day: the place I really need to get to is Tiflis."—"Well you *are* a man of little faith," said the horseman angrily. "However, there's nothing to be done about it: I forgive you: go on, shut your eyes. Now open them," he added a moment later. Asheek gave a cry of joy: they were at the gates of Tiflis. Thanking him sincerely and taking his bag from the saddle, Asheek-Kerib said to the horseman: "Aga, of course, what you



have done for me is very much; but do still more; if I tell people now how in one day I came from Arzinyan to Tiflis, no one will believe me; give me some proof."—"Bend down," said the man, smiling, "and take a handful of earth from under my horse's shoe and hide it in your robe: then if people do not believe your words, order them to bring you a blind woman who has been in this state for seven years, rub the earth on her eyes and she will see." Asheek took the earth from under the horse's foot but no sooner did he raise his head than horse and rider both disappeared; then it was that he believed in his heart that his patron had been none other than Haderiliaz (St. George).

Only late in the evening did Asheek-Kerib reach his home: he knocked on the door with trembling hand and said: "Ana, ana (mother), open the door: I am God's guest; cold and hungry; let me in, please, for the sake of your wandering son." The old woman's weak voice answered him: "To shelter travellers there are the houses of the rich and the powerful: and there are weddings being celebrated in the town, too—you had better go there; you will have the chance to spend the whole night in pleasure."—"Ana," he replied, "I know no one here and so I beg you again: for the sake of your wandering son, let me in." Then his sister said to their mother: "Mother, I will get up and open the door to him."—"Worthless girl," answered the old woman; "you are happy to take in young men and give them meat and drink because it is seven years now since I lost my sight from much weeping."

Her daughter, however, taking no notice of her reproaches, opened the door and admitted Asheek-Kerib: having pronounced the customary greeting, he sat down and began to look around him with concealed anxiety: and on the wall he saw his sweet-voiced saaz hanging in a dusty cover. He asked his mother: "What is that hanging on your wall there?"—"You are curious, guest," she replied. "Let it be enough for you that we give you a bite of bread and let you go on your way tomorrow with our blessings."—"I have already told you," he argued, "that you are my very

own mother and this is my sister and for this good reason I beg of you to explain to me what it is you have hanging there on the wall."—"It is a saaz, a saaz," answered the old woman crossly, not believing a word he said.

"And what does 'saaz' mean?"—"Saaz means a thing to play on and sing songs to." Asheek-Kerib begged her to allow his sister to take the saaz down from the wall and to show it to him. "No," said the old woman. "That is the saaz of my unhappy son and it has been hanging on the wall for seven years now where no living hand has touched it." But his sister had already risen, taken the saaz down from the wall and given it to him: then he raised his eyes to heaven and prayed this prayer: "O, Almighty Allah! if I am to achieve my end, then let my seven-stringed saaz be as perfectly tuned as on the day when I played upon it for the last time." And he struck the copper strings and the strings responded in perfect harmony: and he began to sing: "I am poor Kerib (a beggar), and poor are my words; but the great Haderiliaz helped me to descend from the high cliff, although I am poor and poor are my words. Recognise me, mother, know your wanderer." Upon which his mother burst into tears and asked: "What is your name?"—"Rashid (the brave)," he replied. "Once you have spoken, Rashid, and once you shall listen to me," she said. "Your words have cut my heart to pieces. Tonight I saw in my sleep that the hair of my head had gone white, and it is seven years now since I lost my sight from much weeping; tell me, oh you who have his voice, when will my son come back to me?" And twice she repeated her question with tears. In vain he told her that he was her son, she did not believe him and after a while he asked: "Mother, permit me to take the saaz and to go. I have heard there is a wedding near here: my sister will show me the way; I shall play and sing, and everything I receive I shall bring back here and share with you."—"No," said the old woman, "since my son left, his saaz has not once been out of this house." But he began to promise that he would not harm so much as a single string. "And if but one string breaks,"

Asheek went on, "I shall give you all my property as a forfeit." The old woman felt his bags and realising that they were full of coins, she allowed him to go; having accompanied him to a rich house where a noisy wedding feast was in progress his sister waited in the doorway to see what would happen.

In this house lived Magul-Megeri, and that very night she was to become the wife of Kurshud-Bek. Kurshud-Bek was feasting with his friends and relatives, but Magul-Megeri, sitting behind a rich curtain with her friends, held in one hand a cup of poison and, in the other, a sharp dagger: she had sworn to die rather than let her head rest upon the pillow with Kurshud-Bek. From behind the curtain she heard that a stranger had come, who said: "Salaam aleikum: you are merry here and make feast, so permit me, a poor wanderer, to sit amongst you and for that I will sing you a song."—"Why not?" said Kurshud-Bek. "The doors are open to all singers and dancers, because we are celebrating a wedding. Sing us something, Asheek (minstrel)—and I will send you on your way with a whole fistful of gold."

Then Kurshud-Bek asked him: "And what is your name, traveler?"—"Shindi-Gyorursez (you will soon find out)."—"That is a strange name," the other exclaimed, laughing. "It's the first time I have heard it!"—"When my mother bore me and laboured in pain at my birth, then many neighbours came to the doors and asked whether it were a boy or a girl God had given her; they were answered: 'Shindi-gyorursez (you will soon find out).' And that is why—when I eventually was born—I was given that name." Thereupon he took his saaz and began to play:

"In the town of Halaf I drank wine of Misir, but God gave me wings and I flew hither in one day."

Kurshud-Bek's brother, a rather stupid man, drew his dagger and shouted: "You are lying: how could you come here from Halaf in one day?"

"Why do you want to kill me?" asked Asheek. "It is usual for singers to assemble at one place from far and wide; and I take nothing from you, believe me or believe me not."

"Let him go on," said the bridegroom, and Asheek-Kerib took up his song again.

"I made my morning prayer in the valley of Arzinyan, my noon-tide prayer in the town of Arzerum; before the setting of the sun I made my prayer before the town of Kars, and my evening prayer in Tiflis. Allah gave me wings, and I came flying hither; may God grant that I be as a sacrifice to the white stallion, for he galloped swiftly, surefooted as a tight-rope walker, from the mountain into the ravine and from the ravine into the mountain: Maulyam (the Creator) gave Asheek wings, and he has come to the wedding of Magul-Megeri."

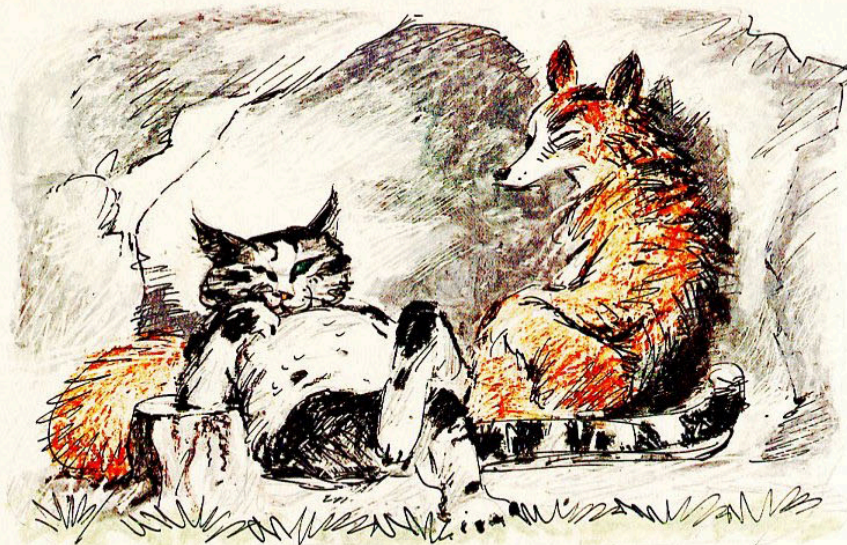
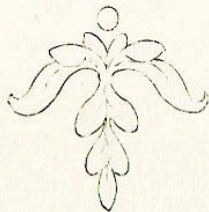
Then Magul-Megeri, recognising his voice, threw the dagger one way and the cup of poison the other. "So that is how you keep your oath," said her friends. "This way you will be the wife of Kurshud-Bek this very night."—"You did not know him, but I know the voice of my beloved," answered Magul-Megeri and, taking a pair of scissors, she cut through the curtain. When she had peeped through and seen that it was indeed her Asheek-Kerib, she cried out, then she flung herself on his neck and both fell to the ground in a dead faint. Kurshud-Bek's brother rushed to them with his knife, intending to stab them both but Kurshud-Bek stopped him, saying: "Calm yourself and know that what is written on a man's brow at birth is not thereafter to be avoided."

When she came to her senses, Magul-Megeri grew red with shame, covered her face with her hands and hid behind her curtain again.

"Now I see very well that you are Asheek-Kerib," said the bridegroom. "But tell us how you managed to travel so great a distance in so short a time."—"To prove the truth of what I say," replied Asheek, "my sabre will cut through stone and if I lie, may my neck be so thin that it will not hold up my head; but best of all bring me some blind woman who has not seen God's world for seven years, and I will give her back her sight."

Asheek-Kerib's sister, who was still standing at the door, ran for her mother when she heard these words. "Mother!" she cried, "it really is my brother and your son Asheek-Kerib," and, taking her by the arm, she led the old woman back to the feast. Then Asheek took the earth from his breast, mixed it with water and pasted it onto his mother's eyes, saying: "Know, all ye people, how great and powerful is Haderiliaz," and his mother's eyes were opened and she saw. After this no one dared to doubt the truth of his words, and Kurshud-Bek surrendered the beautiful Magul-Megeri without a word.

Then in his gladness Asheek-Kerib said to him: "Listen, Kurshud-Bek, I shall comfort you. My sister is no less beautiful than your former bride and I am rich; she will have no less silver and gold; so take her for yourself, and be as happy as I shall be with my beloved Magul-Megeri."



*Vladimir Dahl*

## THE CAT AND THE FOX



There was once a man who had a cat that had caught many a mouse in its youth, but had grown lazy with old age. Or perhaps it had lumbago. Anyway it was of no use at all in the house or yard, and since they stopped feeding it, it began to hunt for itself—only not mice, as before, but milk, cream, butter and cottage cheese, which were evidently greatly to its taste. So the mistress began to chide her husband: what was he doing,

keeping a cat that was spoilt, had not so much as bit the tail off a single mouse for nigh on a year, and got up to mischief all day.

"For one thing," she said, "I've heard that the mice are laughing at us; and for another, the cat gives us no peace: you can't keep everything away from it!"

"Well, why go on at me? Why not do something about it yourself? It's no son of mine, is it?"

The mistress of the house said it was not a woman's job, and that the man should take the cat into the forest when he went to get firewood, and leave it there. And so he did: he went out for firewood, taking the cat with him in a sack, and when he had collected enough branches, he undid the sack, tossed the poor cat into a gully, and drove off. "There," thought the cat, "if I were a dog I would run after the cart, even though dogs are my enemies, but my nature will not permit me to do that. I must evidently stay here and perish!"

"Good-day, Felix the Cat!" said Mistress Fox, seeing the newcomer.

"Good-day, if you like," said the cat, turning its head away, because it was angry with the man.

"How did you get here and what do you want?"

Felix the Cat told her all.

"I used to have a nap after each meal," he said, "that's what made me sleek and fat; but now I am old and good for nothing, and they have banished me here for bad behaviour. So now I am done for."

"Wait," thought the Fox. "Can I not turn this to some advantage? Felix the Cat is an animal the likes of which no one in the forest has seen or heard of: he can be used to frighten folk."

"Now look here, friend Felix," said the Fox, "I am sorry for you and will help you. Come and live with me. Don't expect anything grand, I am a simple soul, but you're welcome to the little I have."

"Thank you for your kind words," said Felix. "Let us go."

And the Fox took him to her hole, dug it out to make it wider, with a funnel-shaped opening to make it look more frightening, and ordered the cat to lie down and have a rest. Then she ran off to call the animals together.

The animals assembled, large and small, to hear what the Fox had to say. After greeting them warmly and wishing them all manner of good things, she said:

"Have you heard what has been happening in our district, friends? A new bailiff has been sent to us, a more terrible one than we have ever seen before. There are hard times ahead! He is called Felix the Cat; he has a bewhiskered face, a needle tongue, eyes like candles, claws like rakes, the tail of a snake, soft fur, and wicked thoughts. Asleep he snores like a human, and awake I have heard him utter but one word—he is forever crying 'more, more, more' whatever offerings you bring him. So, friends, he has already driven me from my home! My poor dugout caught his fancy. But never mind, I would not grieve over that—I would not complain if he offended me. I would just take my goods and chattels and go away to a tree stump or a well, but he will not let me, he orders me to feed him. And that is one thing I cannot do alone. I and my few servants have little enough food, and the bailiff has devoured all my stores and provisions. And he ordered me to call a meeting, so that you may know, and remember, and fear the new bailiff, Felix the Cat. And he has ordered the meeting to see to it that every day he is served with meat and milk. That is all I have to say, friends, you know what to do: you are cleverer than I. But our new bailiff is angry, very angry indeed."

The meeting became noisy and agitated like waves on the sea. "The further you go, the harder it gets," grumbled Bruin, scratching himself. But no one refused to do what the meeting charged him with, and they went home, each remembering what he had to take to the Fox's house and when; but the first thing they agreed to do was to go together tomorrow to pay their respects to Felix the Cat and bring him presents.

They arrived and laid everything out in fear and trembling: the wolf had brought a quarter of a sheep, the bear had brewed some mead, the polecat had plucked and cleaned a duck, and his wife had brought a couple of eggs—in short, each had brought what he could,—and they stood in a ring, waiting, not daring to approach. The Fox looked out of the hole and greeted them all in a whisper.

“Our bailiff is still resting,” she said, “and I dare not waken him: he would be very angry. Be patient, kind folk, and wait.”

“Listen, sister...” the bear began.

But the Fox poked her head out again and said:

“No, Bruin the Bear, excuse me: I am not sister now, but the bailiff’s wife. Felix the Cat came to us a bachelor, and I, too, you know yourselves, have had to struggle along as a poor widow. Well, today he took pity on me and rewarded my true service; so now I would ask you to be kind enough to address me as mistress.”

The animals exchanged glances, shrugged their shoulders, and said nothing; Bruin hung his head and began waving his paw about, inspecting his claws.

A little later out came Mistress Fox and summoned the elders to come one by one to pay their respects to the bailiff, bow low to him and invite him to partake of food.

All the animals were afraid and would not budge from the spot. They only looked at one another, saying:

“You go first, come on!”

Finally they agreed that the wild boar, the oldest, and the most moss-grown, should go; but as soon as he approached and began grunting, although in the most respectful fashion, the bailiff’s wife shouted at him and drove him away, saying that he was lacking in courtesy and good manners.

They called on Bruin to go. Bruin set off, but the moment he saw a pair of fiery eyes in the dark hole, lighting a terrible round face with whiskers, he barely stood his ground, mumbled something, quailed, bowed and moved away.

“Make way,” shouted the Fox. “His honour is coming.”

All the animals went away and hid, some in trees, some others behind tree stumps and bushes. Felix the Cat walked out sedately and, while Mistress Fox whispered in his ear that he should hold his tail as high as possible, he went up to the table prepared for him and began to eat. Then, through force of habit, he rumbled:

“More, more, more!”

At the same time he squinted in the direction where Bruin was rustling some leaves and peeping out from a bush at the strange bailiff, thought it was a mouse, and could not resist leaping at it in a single bound. The animals almost died of fright, and none stood their ground, thinking that their last hour had come. They jumped up and fled without a single backward glance out of the forest, where the Fox moved with her bailiff; and where she lived quietly in comfort and hunted as she pleased.

So it was that the cunning fox took in a decrepit, good-for-nothing cat abandoned by its master, and used it to frighten all the animals out of the forest.





*Konstantin Ushinsky*

## THE BLIND HORSE



A long time ago, a very long time ago, before not only we, but also our grandfathers and great-grandfathers were born, the rich Slav trading town of Vineta stood on the sea shore; and in this town lived a rich merchant by the name of Althom, whose ships laden with precious wares ploughed the seas far and wide.

Althom was very rich and lived in luxury: perhaps his very name Althom,

or All-at-home, came from the fact that his home contained everything good and precious that could be found at that time; and the master himself, his wife and children ate only from gold and silver and dressed only in sable and brocade.

In Althom's stables were many fine horses; but there was none in these stables or in the whole of Vineta more fleet of foot or more handsome than Chase-the-Wind, as Althom called his favourite saddle-horse because of its fleetness of foot. No one dared mount Chase-the-Wind but the owner himself, and he never rode another steed.

On one of his travels to see to his affairs, the merchant was returning to Vineta, when he happened to be riding through a large dark forest on his beloved horse. Evening was approaching and the forest was very dark and dense, the wind rocked the tops of the sullen firs; the merchant was travelling alone, trotting slowly to spare his beloved horse who was tired from the long journey.

Suddenly out of the bushes, as if from nowhere, sprang six robust men with brutal faces, in ragged caps, with bear-spears, axes and knives in their hands; three were mounted and three on foot, and two of the robbers were about to catch the horse by the bridle.

Had he been riding another horse instead of Chase-the-Wind the rich Althom would never have seen his native Vineta again. Feeling a strange hand on the bridle, the horse shot ahead, its broad, powerful chest knocking to the ground the two bold villains who held it by the bridle, trampled a third, who had run forward to bar its way, waving his bear-spear, and sped off like the wind. The mounted robbers set off in pursuit; their horses were good, too, but how could they catch up Althom's steed!

In spite of its tiredness, Chase-the-Wind sensed the pursuit and raced like an arrow from a tightly drawn bow, leaving the furious scoundrels far behind.

Half an hour later Althom was riding into his native Vineta on his good horse, from which the lather was streaming down.

Dismounting from the horse, whose flanks had risen high with exhaustion, the merchant stroked Chase-the-Wind's sweating neck and solemnly vowed that whatever happened he would never sell or give away his loyal horse, never drive it away however old it was, and feed it three measures of the best oats each day until it died.

But Althom was in a hurry to greet his wife and children and did not see to the horse himself, and the lazy groom did not look after the exhausted horse, did not let it cool down and gave it water too soon.

From that day Chase-the-Wind grew ill and sickly, its legs became weak and, finally, it went blind. The merchant grieved bitterly, and for six months kept his promise: the blind horse remained in the stable and each day it was fed three measures of oats.

Then Althom bought himself another saddle-horse, and six months later he decided it was wasteful to give a blind, good-for-nothing horse three measures of oats, and ordered that it be given two. Another six months passed; the blind horse was still young and would have to be fed for a long time, so they began to give it one measure a day. Finally, the merchant decided that this was also too much, and ordered Chase-the-Wind to be unbridled and driven out of the gates so that it did not take up room in the stable. The grooms drove the blind horse out with a stick, because it dug in its heels and would not budge.

Poor, blind Chase-the-Wind did not understand what was happening, and not knowing or seeing where to go, stayed by the gate, head hanging and ears moving sadly. Night came and it began to snow. Sleeping on the cobbles was hard and cold for the poor, blind horse. It stood on the same spot for several hours, but finally hunger drove it in search of food. Lifting its head and sniffing at least for a bunch of straw from the old, sagging roof, the blind horse wandered at random, bumping into the corners of houses and fences.

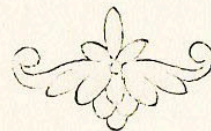
I should explain that in Vineta, as in all old Slav towns, there was no prince, and the town dwellers ruled themselves, gathering

on the square when it was necessary to decide matters of importance. This assembly of the people to decide its own affairs, administer justice and mete out punishment was called a *veche*. In the middle of Vineta, in the square where the *veche* used to meet, from four posts hung the large *veche* bell, which summoned the people together and could be rung by anyone who felt that he had been wronged and wanted judgment and protection from the people. Of course, no one would dare to ring the *veche* bell for a trifle, because they knew the people would punish them for it.

Wandering over the square, the blind, deaf and hungry horse happened to bump into the posts on which the bell hung and, hoping perhaps to find a bunch of straw from the eaves, caught hold of the rope tied to the bell's tongue in its teeth, and began to pull: the bell clanged so loudly that, although it was still very early, the people came running to the square, curious to know who was demanding their judging and protection so loudly. Everyone in Vineta knew Chase-the-Wind, knew that he had saved his master's life, and knew about his master's promise—so they were surprised to see the poor horse, blind, hungry, shivering with the cold and covered with snow, in the middle of the square.

It soon transpired what was the matter, and when the people learned that the rich Althom had driven away the horse who saved his life, they decided unanimously that Chase-the-Wind was quite right to ring the *veche* bell.

They summoned the ungrateful merchant to the square; and, in spite of his attempts to justify himself, ordered him to keep the horse as before and feed it until the day it died. A special person was appointed to see that the sentence was carried out, and the sentence itself was carved on the stone set up to commemorate this event in the *veche* square.





*Lev Tolstoy*

## THE RIGHTEOUS JUDGE



An Algerian ruler by the name of Bawakas wanted to find out for himself whether it was true, as he had been told, that in one of his towns there lived a righteous judge, who could immediately recognise the truth and no rogue could deceive him. Bawakas dressed up as a merchant and set off on horseback for the town where the judge lived. By the gateway into the town a cripple came up to Bawakas and began to beg alms.

Bawakas gave him some money and was about to ride on, when the cripple caught hold of his cloak.

"What do you want?" asked Bawakas. "Haven't I given you alms?"

"Yes, you have," said the cripple, "but do me another favour, carry me on your horse to the square, or I will be crushed by the horses and camels."

Bawakas sat the cripple behind him and carried him to the square. In the square Bawakas stopped the horse. But the cripple did not get off. Bawakas said:

"Why are you sitting there? Get down, we have arrived."

But the beggar said:

"Why should I get down, it's my horse; and if you won't give up the horse of your own free will, let's go to the judge."

People had gathered round them and were listening to their argument; they all shouted:

"Go to the judge, he will settle the dispute!"

Bawakas and the cripple went to the judge. There were other people there, too, and the judge called them by turn to settle their disputes.

Before it was Bawakas' turn, the judge called a scholar and a peasant. They were quarrelling over a wife. The peasant said it was his wife, and the scholar said it was his. The judge heard them out, paused for a moment and said:

"Leave the wife with me, and come back tomorrow."

When they had left, a butcher and an oil-seller came in. The butcher was covered with blood, and the oil-seller with oil. The butcher was holding money in his hand, and the oil-seller the butcher's arm. The butcher said:

"I bought some oil from this man and drew out my purse to pay, but he grabbed my arm and tried to take the money. And that is how we have come to you—I holding a purse in my hand, and he holding my arm. But the money is mine, and he is a thief."

But the oil-seller said:

"That is not true. The butcher came to me to buy oil. After I had poured him a full jug, he asked me to change a gold piece.

I got the money and put it on the counter, then he took it and tried to run off. I caught him by the arm and brought him here."

The judge paused for a moment and said:

"Leave the money here and come back tomorrow."

When it was the turn of Bawakas and the cripple, Bawakas recounted what had happened. The judge heard him out and then asked the cripple. The beggar said:

"That is not true. I was riding on my horse through the town, and he was sitting on the ground and asked me to give him a ride. I put him on my horse and took him where he wanted to go; but he would not get off and said that it was his horse. That is not true."

The judge thought for a moment and said:

"Leave the horse with me and come back tomorrow."

The next day many people gathered to hear the judge's verdict.

The first to come up were the scholar and the peasant.

"Take your wife," the judge said to the scholar, "and give the peasant fifty strokes."

The scholar took his wife, and the peasant was punished forthwith.

Next the judge called the butcher.

"The money is yours," he said to the butcher. Then he pointed to the oil-seller and said: "He is to be given fifty strokes."

Then Bawakas and the cripple were summoned.

"Would you know your horse from twenty others?" the judge asked Bawakas.

"I would."

"And you?"

"I would, too," said the cripple.

"Come with me," the judge said to Bawakas.

They went into the stable. Bawakas immediately pointed to his horse among the other twenty.

Then the judge called the cripple into the stable and ordered him to point to the horse. The cripple recognised the horse and pointed to it. Then the judge sat down on his seat and said to Bawakas:

"The horse is yours: take it. And the cripple is to be given fifty strokes."

After the trial, the judge went off home, and Bawakas followed him.

"What is the matter? Are you not happy with my decision?" asked the judge.

"I am happy with it," said Bawakas. "But I should like to know how you found out that the wife belonged to the scholar and not to the peasant, that the money belonged to the butcher and not the oil-seller, and that the horse was mine and not the cripple's."

"I found out about the wife like this: in the morning I summoned her to me and asked her to fill my ink-well with ink. She picked up the ink-well, washed it quickly, and deftly poured in the ink. So she was obviously used to doing this. Had she been the peasant's wife she would not have been able to do it. So, the scholar was right... I found out about the money like this: I put the money in a cup of water and looked at it this morning to see whether there was any oil on the surface. If the money had been the oil-seller's, it would have had oil on it from his hands. There was no oil on the water, so obviously the butcher was telling the truth... It was harder to find out about the horse. Both the cripple and you immediately pointed it out from the other twenty horses. But I did not take you both into the stable to see whether you knew the horse, but to see which of you the horse knew. When you walked up to it, it turned its head and moved towards you; but when the cripple touched it, it flattened its ears and raised its leg. So I knew that you were the true owner of the horse."

Then Bawakas said:

"I am no merchant, but the ruler Bawakas. I came here to see whether it was true what is said about you. I see now that you are a wise judge. Ask me for anything you like, and I will reward you."

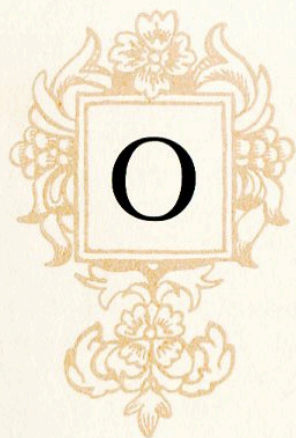
"I need no reward..." said the judge.





*Vsevolod Garshin*

## THE FROG WENT TRAVELLING



Once upon a time there lived a Frog. She lived in a swamp, caught midges and mosquitoes, and in spring croaked loudly together with all the other frogs. She would have lived there happily till the end of her days—if a stork did not eat her up, of course—but something happened one day which upset all her life.

She was squatting on a snag that stuck out of water, enjoying the warm drizzle.

"What a lovely, wet day! How wonderful to be alive!" she was thinking.

The rain fell on her spotted, shiny back; the drops trickled under her tummy and behind her legs, and it was so pleasant that she all but croaked from delight, but fortunately remembered in time that this was autumn and frogs do not croak in autumn—spring is the season for croaking. So she bit back the croak, and went on enjoying herself in silence.

Suddenly, she heard a thin, whistling, breaking sound high overhead. There is a breed of wild ducks whose wings make a singing, or rather a whistling sound as they cut through the air. They usually fly so high that you can hardly see them, and only know the flock is there from the sound. This time, the ducks came lower and, after describing a huge semicircle in the air, alighted on the very swamp where the Frog had her home.

"Quack-quack," said one of the ducks. "We've a long way to go, so we'd better have something to eat here."

On hearing this, the Frog quickly hid in the water. She knew that the ducks would not eat her, a big and fat frog, but still it was safer to duck under the snag.

But she so wanted to hear where the ducks were going, that after a little thought she ventured to poke her goggle-eyed face out of the water.

"Quack-quack," said another duck. "It's getting cold. We must hurry to the south, we must hurry to the south!"

And all the other ducks began to quack in loud approval.

"Forgive me for butting in," the Frog said timidly. "But what is that place where you are hurrying, that south?"

The ducks flocked round the Frog. Their first thought was to eat her, but then each of the ducks decided that she was too big and would stick in the throat. And then they all began to scream together, flapping their wings:

"It's lovely in the south! It's warm there now. There are such nice, warm swamps! And such fat worms! Oh, it's lovely in the south!"

Their excited screaming almost deafened the Frog. She got them to keep quiet at last, and begged the duck which seemed

to have more sense than the others to tell her just what was the south.

And when the duck told her, the Frog thought it truly wonderful, but she was a cautious soul, and so she asked to make sure:

"Are there any midges and mosquitoes there?"

"Oh, clouds of them!" replied the duck.

The Frog gave a croak, and quickly turned round to see if any of her friends had heard her croaking in the autumn. But she simply could not help croaking, if only once. "Take me with you," she said to the ducks.

"The idea!" replied the surprised ducks. "How can we take you along? You've no wings."

"When are you starting?" asked the Frog.

"Soon, very soon," cried all the ducks together. "Quack, quack, quack, quack! It's cold here. We must hurry south, south, south!"

"Give me five minutes, will you?" begged the Frog. "I'll be back, I'm sure to think of something."

She flopped into the water from the snag on which she had climbed again, dived into the mud and buried herself in it completely so that nothing should interfere with her thinking. The five minutes passed, the ducks decided to take off, and in that precise moment the Frog popped out of the water near the snag, and her face beamed as brightly as a frog's face can beam.

"I've thought of something! I've found a way," she cried. "Let two of you take a twig in your bills, and I'll hang on it in the middle. You'll fly and carry me. The only thing is you must not quack and I must not croak, then everything will be fine."

Although carrying even a light frog for thousands of miles and never quacking was not much fun, the ducks were so delighted with the Frog's cleverness that they all agreed to carry her. They would change every two hours, and since there were so many of them and just one frog, their turn would not come too often. They found a good, strong twig, two of the ducks took the ends in their bills while the Frog hung by her mouth in the middle, and the whole flock took wing.



The Frog's breath caught from the terrible height to which the ducks raised her; besides, they did not keep in line properly and jerked the twig. The poor Frog swung in the air like a paper clown, clenching her jaws with all her might for fear of loosening her hold and dashing on the ground far below. Even so, she soon became used to this strange position and began to take a look round her. Hanging from the twig she could not very well see the fields, meadows, rivers and hills which flickered past very quickly, but still she could look up and see behind her a bit, so she was proud and happy just the same.

"Aren't I clever to think of this!" she said to herself.

In the meantime, the ducks flying behind the front pair that carried her, praised her with loud cries.

"Isn't our frog brainy," they said. "There aren't many as brainy even among the ducks!"

The Frog wanted to thank them, but remembering in time that if she opened her mouth she'd fall from that terrible height, she clenched her jaws all the harder and kept quiet. She swung like that all day; the ducks changed in flight, smartly passing the twig to the next pair, but it was terribly frightening, and the Frog almost croaked from fear, but she had to be brave and brave she was. In the evening, the flock stopped for the night in a strange swamp. At dawn, they were off again, but this time the Frog faced front, and not back as before, the better to see what was below. The ducks flew over reaped fields, yellow forests, and villages where the harvest was stacked in ricks. They could hear people talking and the sound of the flails with which they threshed the rye. The people craned their necks to see the flock and, noticing something strange about it, pointed with their hands. The Frog terribly wanted to fly lower over the ground, to let the people see her and to hear what they said about her. At the next halt she said to the ducks:

"Couldn't we fly a bit lower? The height makes me dizzy and I'm afraid I'll fall if I suddenly feel bad."

The kind ducks promised not to fly so high. And the following day they flew so low that they could make out what people said on the ground.

"Look, look," the children cried in one of the villages. "Look, the ducks are carrying a frog!"

The Frog heard them, and her heart leapt.

"Look, look," the grown-ups shouted in the next village. "You've never seen the like!"

Could they know that it was her idea and not the ducks', the Frog wondered.

"Look, look," the children cried in the third village they flew over. "Who on earth could have thought of such a clever thing!"

This was too much for the Frog and, forgetting caution, she screamed at the top of her voice:

"I did! It was my idea, mine!"

And, with this scream, she went hurtling down to the ground. The ducks cried in alarm; one of them tried to catch the frog in flight, and missed. The Frog, with all her four paws jerking, fell quickly, but as the ducks had been flying very quickly too, she fell not on the hard road, above which she started screaming, but further on, at the edge of the village, flopping luckily into a large, dirty pond.

She popped out of the water at once, and screamed excitedly at the top of her voice:

"It was my idea, mine!"

But there was no one to hear her. The local frogs had hidden in the water, frightened by the sudden splash. They now began to appear from the water one by one, and all stared in dismay at the stranger.

The Frog told them how she had been thinking all her life and had at last invented a new, extraordinary manner of travelling. She had her own ducks, she told the frogs, who carried her wherever she wanted to go. She had been to the south where

it was so lovely, where the swamps were so beautiful and warm, and where there were clouds of midges and all kinds of other delicious insects.

"I just dropped in to see how you were," she said. "I'll stay with you till spring until my ducks come back for me. I let them off, you see."

But the ducks never came back. They thought the Frog had crashed on the hard road, and were very sorry for her.



*Dmitri Mamin-Sibiriak*

## LITTLE GREY NECK



I  
he first cold spell of autumn, that turned the grass yellow, threw the birds into a state of great anxiety. They began to prepare for their long journey and had a grave, worried air. It is no easy matter to fly a distance of several thousands miles . . . How many poor birds would not have the strength to cover it, how many would perish from chance accidents on the way. There was indeed food for thought.

The big, serious birds, swans, geese and ducks, prepared for the journey with an important air, fully aware of difficulty of the forthcoming undertaking; but it was the little birds, the sand-pipers, phalarope, dunlin and plover, who flapped and fussed and squawked most of all. They had gathered in flocks and were wheeling from bank to bank, over the shoals and marshes, as quickly as a handful of tossed peas. The little birds were so busy...

The forest stood dark and silent, for the main warblers had flown away without waiting for the cold.

"Why are those little brats in such a hurry!" grumbled the old Drake, who did not like to bestir himself. "We'll all fly away in good time... I don't see what all the fuss is about."

"You were always lazy, that's why you don't like seeing others busy," explained his wife, the old Duck.

"I was lazy? You're just being unfair to me, and that's that. Perhaps I worry more than anyone, only I don't show it. There's no use rushing round the bank from dawn to dusk, squawking, disturbing other folk, and upsetting everyone."

The Duck was not particularly pleased with her spouse in general, and now she got really angry.

"Just look at the others, you lazy thing! It's a pleasure to watch our neighbours, the geese or the swans. They live together so happily... I bet a swan or a goose would never leave its nest—and they are always at the head of the brood. Yes, they are... But you've no time for the children. You think only of yourself, of stuffing your belly. Lazy, that's the word for it... I'm sick of the sight of you."

"Steady on, old girl! After all, I don't talk about you having such an unpleasant character. Everyone's got his faults... It's not my fault that geese are stupid birds and that's why they fuss over their brood. My rule is not to stick my nose in other folk's business. Why should I? Live and let live."

The Drake was fond of weighty arguments, and it somehow always turned out that he, the Drake, was right, clever and better

than anyone else. The Duck had got used to this long ago, and now it was something else that was worrying her.

"What sort of a father are you?" she let fly at her husband. "Fathers look after their children, but you couldn't care less!"

"Are you talking about Little Grey Neck? What can I do, if she can't fly? It's not my fault..."

Little Grey Neck was their crippled daughter, whose wing had been broken in the spring when the Fox crept up to the brood and snatched a duckling. The old Duck had attacked the enemy bravely and rescued the duckling; but one of her wings got broken.

"It's terrible to think of leaving Little Grey Neck here alone," the Duck repeated, tearfully. "Everyone will fly away, and she will stay all on her own. Yes, all alone... We will fly off to the warm south, but she will stay here and freeze, poor creature... After all, she is our daughter, and I love her so much, my Little Grey Neck! You know what, old man, I'll stay here with her for the winter..."

"What about the other children?"

"They're healthy, they'll manage without me."

The Drake always tried to change the subject when the conversation turned to Little Grey Neck. He loved her, too, of course, but why so worked up about it? Of course it was a pity that she would stay here and freeze, but there was nothing they could do about it. And they had to think about the other children, too. His wife was forever worrying, but you had to look things straight in the eye. The Drake was secretly sorry for his wife, but did not quite understand her maternal grief. It would have been better if the Fox had eaten Little Grey Neck for she was bound to perish in the winter anyway.

## II

In view of the approaching parting, the old Duck was twice as affectionate to her crippled daughter. Poor Little Grey Neck did not know the meaning of parting and loneliness, and watched the others prepare for the journey with the curiosity of a novice.

True, she sometimes felt envious that her brothers and sisters were so gaily preparing to fly away, that they would be going far, far away, to where there was no winter.

"You will come back in the spring, won't you?" Little Grey Neck asked her mother.

"Yes, yes, dear, we'll come back... And we'll all live together again."

To comfort Little Grey Neck, who was beginning to grow pensive, her mother told her of similar cases when ducks had stayed for the winter. She was personally acquainted with two such couples.

"You'll manage somehow, dear," the old Duck reassured her. "At first you'll be a bit lonely, then you'll get used to it. I wish we could take you to the warm spring that does not freeze in winter,—that would be really good. It's not far from here... But what's the good of wishing, we can't take you there, and that's that!"

"I will think of you all the time..." repeated poor Little Grey Neck. "I'll keep wondering where you are, and what you are doing, and whether you are alright... It will be just the same as if I were with you."

It was all the old Duck could do to conceal her despair. She tried to look happy and wept secretly so no one saw. How sorry she was for poor, sweet Little Grey Neck!... She hardly noticed the other children now and paid no attention to them, she even thought she did not love them.

How quickly time flew! There had already been several morning frosts. The birches turned yellow from the cold and the aspens red. The water in the river grew darker, and the river itself looked larger because its banks were now bare,—its trees and bushes lost their leaves quickly. The cold autumn wind ripped off the dry leaves and carried them away. The sky was often covered with heavy clouds that brought light autumn rain. In general, it was not very pleasant, and flocks of migrating birds had been sweeping past for several days...

The first to take off were the marsh birds, because the marshes had already begun to freeze. The water-fowl remained longer than anyone else. Little Grey Neck was grieved most of all by the departure of the cranes, because they cried so plaintively, as if calling her to go with them. For the first time she had a pang of secret foreboding, and gazed for a long while at the flock of cranes winging across the sky.

"How nice it must be for them!" thought Little Grey Neck.

The swans, geese and ducks were also beginning to prepare for the flight. Individual nests joined together in large flocks. The old, experienced birds taught the young. Each morning the young birds would make practice flights, chirping merrily, to strengthen their wings for the long journey. The wise leaders taught them first in small groups, then all together. There was so much squawking, youthful high spirits and excitement...

Only Little Grey Neck could not take part in these flights and admired them from afar. There was nothing to do but reconcile herself to her fate. But how well she swam and dived! Water was her element.

"We must be setting off... it's high time!" the old leaders were saying. "What are we waiting for?"

Time flew, so quickly... And the fatal day arrived.

The whole flock gathered in a seething mass on the river. It was an early autumn morning, and the water was still covered with a dense mist. The flock of ducks numbered three hundred. You could hear nothing but the quacking of the leaders.

The old Duck had not slept all night—it was the last she would spend with Little Grey Neck.

"You stay over there by the bank where the spring runs into the river," she advised her. "The water does not freeze there in winter."

Little Grey Neck kept apart from the flock, like a stranger...

They were all so preoccupied with the departure that no one paid any attention to her. The old Duck's heart ached for her poor Little Grey Neck. Several times she decided to stay; but

how could she when there were the other children and she had to fly together with the flock?

"Off we go," the main leader ordered loudly, and the flock rose up together.

Little Grey Neck was left alone on the river and watched the departing flock for a long time. At first they flew in a seething mass, but then they straightened out into a neat triangle and disappeared from view.

"Am I really all alone?" thought Little Grey Neck, bursting into tears. "It would have been better if the Fox had eaten me..."

### III

The river where Little Grey Neck stayed flowed gaily in the mountains covered with dense forest. It was a deserted spot with no dwellings anywhere around. In the morning the water by the banks began to freeze, but in the afternoon the ice, thin as glass, melted.

"Surely the whole river won't freeze over?" thought Little Grey Neck in horror.

She was lonely on her own, and kept thinking about her departed brothers and sisters. Where were they now? Had they arrived safely? Did they still remember her? There was enough time now to think about everything. She learned the meaning of loneliness. The river was empty, and the only life was in the forest, where hazel-grouse whistled and squirrels and hares darted about.

Once Little Grey Neck was so lonely that she climbed into the forest and was very frightened when a Hare somersaulted out from behind a bush.

"Goodness, you did frighten me, you silly thing!" muttered the Hare, recovering his composure. "Made my hair stand on end... What are you doing here? The ducks flew away long ago."

"I can't fly: the Fox bit my wing when I was very little..."

"Oh, that Fox! She's the worst of the lot. Been after me for a long time... You watch out for her, specially when the river gets frozen over. She'll pounce on you..."

They made friends. The Hare was as defenceless as Little Grey Neck, and managed to stay alive by constant flight.

"If I had wings, like a bird, I don't think I'd be afraid of anyone! You may not have wings, but you can swim, and if anything happens you can just dive into the water," he said. "But I tremble with fear all the time. I have enemies all round me. In the summer I can hide, but in winter you can see everything."

The first fall of snow came soon, but the river still resisted the cold. It destroyed everything that froze in the night. It was a fight to the death. The most dangerous nights were the clear, starry ones, when all was still and there were no waves on the river. The river seemed to sleep, and the cold tried to fetter it with ice as it slept.

And this is just what happened. It was a starry night, as still as could be. The dark forest on the bank stood quietly, like giants on guard. The mountains looked higher, as they do at night. A high moon bathed all in its trembling, sparkling light. The mountain river that had seethed in the afternoon grew calm, and the cold crept quietly up, embraced the proud beauty tightly and seemed to cover her with glass.

Little Grey Neck was in despair, because only a small patch of water in the very middle of the river remained unfrozen. There was only about thirty meters where she could swim.

Little Grey Neck's distress knew no bounds when the Fox appeared on the bank, the very same Fox that had broken her wing.

"Ah, an old acquaintance, good-day to you!" said the Fox affectionately, stopping on the bank. "Haven't seen you for a long time... Happy winter to you."

"Go away, please, I don't want to talk to you," replied Little Grey Neck.

"So that's what I get for being friendly! You're a nice one, and no mistake! People say a lot of untrue things about me, you know. They get up to some mischief, then put the blame on me... Goodbye for now!"

When the Fox had gone, the Hare appeared and said:  
"Watch out, Little Grey Neck: she will come again."

And Little Grey Neck began to be afraid like the Hare. The poor thing could not admire the miracles that were happening around her. It was real winter now. The earth was covered with a snow-white carpet. Not a single dark patch remained. Even the bare birch trees, alder, willow and rowan were trimmed with a frost like silver down. The firs were even more impressive. They were covered with snow as if they had donned a warm fur coat.

Everywhere was exquisitely beautiful. But poor Little Grey Neck knew one thing only, that this beauty was not for her, and she trembled at the thought that the patch of water would freeze and she would have nowhere to go. The Fox really did come a few days later. She sat on the bank and began talking to Little Grey Neck again:

"I got lonely without you, little duck... Come out, or if you don't want to, I will come to see you... I'm not proud..."

The Fox began to crawl cautiously over the ice towards the patch of water. Little Grey Neck's heart stopped beating. But the Fox could not get to the water, because the ice there was still very thin. She lay her head on her front paws, licked herself and said:

"How silly you are, little duck... Come out onto the ice! Oh, well, goodbye, then. I have other matters to attend to..."

The Fox began to come every day—to see whether the patch of water had frozen over. The cold frosts did their work. Now all that remained of the patch was a tiny window, about two meters wide. The ice was thick, and the Fox sat on the very edge. Poor Little Grey Neck dived into the water in terror, and the Fox sat there and laughed nastily:

"Dive if you like, but I'll eat you all the same... You'd do better to come out on your own."

The Hare watched the Fox from the bank, and his little hare's heart was as angry as could be.

"Oh, that horrid Fox! And poor Little Grey Neck! The Fox will eat her up."

In all probability the Fox would have eaten Little Grey Neck when the patch of water froze, but things turned out differently. The Hare saw it all with his own squinty eyes.

It was in the morning. The Hare jumped out of his hole to get some food and play with the other hares. It was very frosty, and the hares warmed themselves by clapping their paws. It was fun, in spite of the cold.

"Look out, everyone," somebody shouted.

And danger was close at hand, indeed. On the edge of the forest stood a hunched old hunter, who had skied up silently and was deciding which of the hares to shoot.

"Ha, there's a warm coat for my old woman!" he thought, choosing the largest hare.

He was already taking aim, when the hares noticed him and sped into the forest like mad things.

"Ee, the crafty lot," thought the old man angrily. "I'll get you... The silly things don't understand that the old woman must have a fur coat. She can't freeze, can she? You won't get the better of Akintich, however fast you run. Akintich will be craftier than you... Akintich's old woman told him, 'Don't you come back without a fur coat, old man!' And you're running off..."

The old man climbed down to follow the hares' tracks, but the hares had spread over the forest like peas. The old man was surprised. He cursed the crafty hares and sat down on the river bank to rest.

"Oh dear, old woman, our coat's run away!" he thought aloud. "Never mind, I'll have a rest and look for another one."

The old man sat there, ruefully, and then what should he see but the Fox creeping over the frozen river, like a cat.

"Well, I never, what a bit of luck!" said the old man, happily. "A collar for the old woman's coat has crept up for the taking. Must be thirsty, or it wants to do some fishing."

The Fox really had crept right up to the patch of water where Little Grey Neck was swimming, and lain down on the ice. The

old man's eyes were failing and he did not see the duck behind the Fox.

"I must shoot so as not to spoil the collar," thought the old man, taking aim at the Fox. "The old woman will give me what-for if the collar's full of holes... There's a right way of doing everything, even killing a bedbug."

The old man took aim for a long time, choosing a good spot on the collar-to-be. Finally the shot rang out. Through the smoke the hunter saw something flash on the ice, and rushed over to the patch of water. He tripped twice on the way, and when he got to the patch of water he stopped in dismay: there was no collar at all, only frightened Little Grey Neck swimming in the water.

"Well, I never!" the old man sighed, spreading out his arms in astonishment. "First time I've seen a fox turn into a duck... The crafty beggar!"

"The Fox ran away, Grandad," Little Grey Neck explained.

"Ran away? That's goodbye to your fur collar, old woman... What shall I do now, eh? What a nuisance... But why are you swimming here, you silly?"

"I couldn't fly away with the others, Grandad. One of my wings is hurt..."

"Ee, you silly lass! You'll freeze to death here or the Fox will eat you... Mmm..."

The old man thought and thought, then shook his head and decided:

"This is what we'll do: I'll take you to my grand-daughters. They will be pleased. And in the spring you will lay eggs for the old woman and hatch ducklings. Right? That's what we'll do, you silly..."

The old man took Little Grey Neck out of the patch of water and tucked her into his jacket.

"I won't say anything to the old woman," he thought, setting off home. "Let her fur coat and collar roam around a bit longer in the forest. The main thing is that our grand-daughters will be so pleased..."

The hares saw all this and smiled happily. Never mind, the old woman would not be cold on the stove, even without a fur coat.



*Nikolai Garin*

## THE TIGER HUNTERS

A Korean Folk Tale

S

ome twenty years ago in the province of Hamgyong North, in the town of Kilchu, there was a society of tiger hunters. The members of the society were very rich. A poor young man sought in vain to enter the society and become a member.

"Who do you think you are?" the chairman said to him. "Don't you know that a poor man is no man at all? Be off with you."

Nevertheless the young man denied himself everything and made himself a steel spear just as good, and perhaps even better than those of the other hunters.

And when they set off to the mountains one day to hunt tigers he went too.

When they halted by a ravine he went up to them and again begged them to accept him.

But they were enjoying themselves, and had no time for a poor man; they again drove him away derisively.

"Well, in that case," said the young man, "you drink and be merry here, and I will go alone."

"Go, madman," they said to him, "if you wish to be torn to pieces by tigers."

"Death from a tiger is better than insults from you."

And he went into the forest. Entering a thicket, he saw a huge striped tiger. The tiger played like a cat with him: jumping towards him, then back again, lying down and looking at him as it waved its huge tail from side to side.

This continued until the hunter, according to custom, shouted scornfully to the tiger:

"Accept my spear!"

At that moment the tiger leapt at the hunter and, meeting the spear, caught hold of it with his teeth. But then the hunter drove the spear, with superhuman strength, into his throat, and the tiger fell dead to the ground.

It was a tigress, and the tiger, her mate, was already bounding to her aid.

There was no need to cry "accept my spear!", for as soon as it saw the hunter, it threw itself at him with a terrible leap.

The hunter managed to take aim with his spear at this one, too, and cast it into the tiger's jaws.

He dragged the two dead tigers into the bushes, with their tails showing on the path.

Then he returned to the hunters who were making merry.

"Well, then? Killed a lot of tigers?"

"I found two, but could not deal with them and came to ask for your help."

"That's more like it: show us where they are."

They left their merrymaking and followed the hunter. On the way they mocked him:

"So you didn't want to die, and you came to us for help..."

"Be quiet," the poor hunter ordered them, "the tigers are nearby."

They had to keep silent. Now he was senior among them.

"There are the tigers," the hunter pointed to the tails.

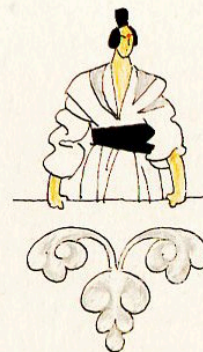
They stood in a line and shouted:

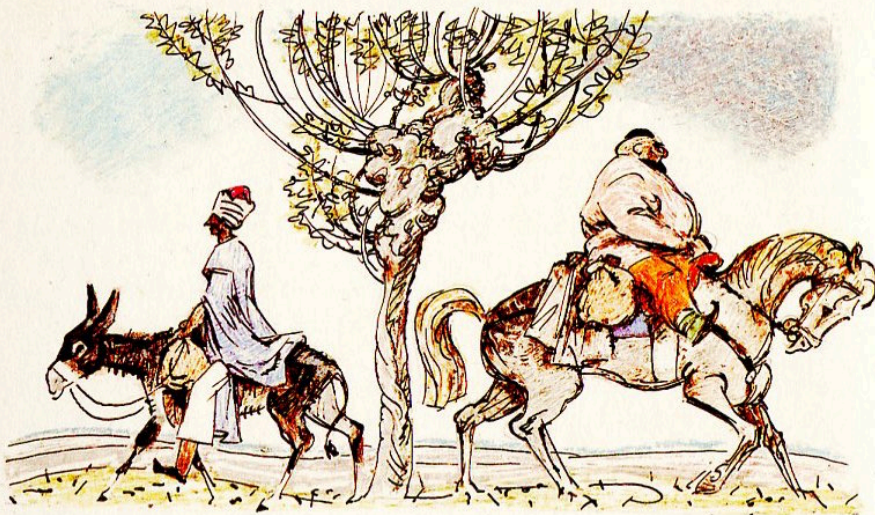
"Accept my spear!"

But the dead tigers did not move.

Then the poor hunter said:

"They have already accepted a spear, now they just need to be pulled to town; that's for you to do."





*Alexander Kuprin*

## KISMET

*An Oriental Legend*

I

n days of yore, there lived in a small but prosperous town a merchant who traded in carpets, ivory, spices and attar of roses. His intelligence, urbanity, piety and integrity, and the perfect way in which he ran his affairs won him universal trust and esteem.

One day an opportunity arose for him to acquire a large consignment of gold-dust at a low price and sell it at a profit so high as to triple his fortune. But to

gather the necessary sum, he had to muster, not only all his available money but all he had lent out, and to sell all his merchandise into the bargain. After carefully weighing all the pros and cons, he saw that the deal was a profitable one and could fail only if Fate frowned upon him; so he made up his mind to stake his entire fortune on the venture.

Within a week he had made all the necessary preparations and dispositions, without letting any member of his household into the secret, as befit a shrewd man. In the small hours of Thursday night—an auspicious time for all undertakings—he said to his eldest son: “Saddle the bay mare for yourself, and the mule for me with the saddlebags.”

The son obeyed unquestioningly, as was his custom. He attached to either side of the saddle the two small leather bags his father had given him. The two said a short prayer for the road and left home at daybreak. The father rode in front, his son somewhat behind him.

Their road lay under a good star, and their deals were all struck so quickly and to such advantage that this run of good luck began to frighten the merchant, who kept on muttering: “If Allah so wishes!” of “If it pleases the Almighty!”, this to ward off evil.

On the way he learned that prices for luxury goods had soared thanks to the marriage of the Dauphin of France to the Spanish Infanta, so that he was able to sell all his goods on credit, with deposits far in excess of his calculations. His debtors were all prosperous and affable, and willingly paid up their debts. And no hindrances or delays appeared on their road.

The merchant’s affairs attended to, he started out for the opulent coastal city where his gold-dust awaited him. His heart was light, but at times he would mutter “Inshallah” in his beard.

Within a day’s travel from their destination, the two turned into a roadside inn to have a meal and spend the night. The father, as usual, took the saddlebags and went to the coffee-room, while the son unsaddled the animals and gave them their

fodder in the stables. Then the two washed their hands, and after a prayer sat down for a modest meal.

Their supper was not yet over, when a ragged, noisy and disreputable-looking crowd rushed in and ordered wine. They drank, bawled songs and drank again. Soon a quarrel sprang up, developing into a brawl: abuses, shouts and fisticuffs. Flashing knives were drawn.

"There's trouble brewing. Let's be off," said the merchant, rising from the table. "I'll help you with the animals."

In pitch darkness, they hurriedly saddled the mare and the mule, went onto the road and galloped until the noise of the fray had died away. But when all was quiet, the father abruptly stopped his mule, felt around himself and ordered his son:

"Stop! Ride back!"

And he turned his mule about and rode off headlong, applying his stick to the animal. His son followed.

Once in the inn-yard again, they peeped into the coffee-room windows and listened: it was as quiet as the grave. The lamps were burning, but nobody was in sight. On a closer look, they could see dead bodies and pools of blood. They called for the inn-keeper and the servants, but to no avail: they must have hidden somewhere in the house or in the forest nearby, scared by the brawl.

The merchant threw the reins to his son, ran up the steps, entered the coffee-room, came up to the table where they had supped, bent over the bench—and lo! his son saw him lift their two leather saddlebags tied together, and throw them over his shoulder. Only now did it dawn upon the young man that they had left the bags behind in their hurry.

When the merchant reappeared in the yard, he did not say a word. He attached the bags to his saddle, jumped on his mule and struck it on the belly with his stick.

They galloped for a long time, afraid the police would come to the inn, follow hot on their heels, seize them and take them

to the Kazi; and the latter is wont to fleece one down to the last penny whether one is guilty or not.

At daybreak, they reached a rivulet hidden in a shady grove, where the merchant told his son to dismount and tethered the animals to a tree.

"Take the bags and follow me," he said after their morning ablution.

They came to a small glade concealed from all eyes. The merchant halted and said:

"And now sit down."

They sat down on the grass, and the father untied the two bags and silently began to divide their contents into two equal parts: the diamonds, pearls and turquoise were arranged in two heaps, stone to stone, according to their size and merit. The same was done with the goldpieces and the rich Moors' promissory notes. This over, the merchant said:

"Here are two equal shares. One of them is yours. Take whichever heap you wish, put everything into a bag and tie it to your saddle. Mount your horse at once and ride on in the direction we have been taking. Within a few minutes' ride, the road forks. Turn to the left: it's the shorter way home. Remember: you are now head of the family. Live in the way you think fit. I am in no position to give you any advice or any blessing. Go, and never look back. I shall be away for a long time, perhaps, forever. Go."

His son heard him out in silence, prostrated himself and kissed the earth before him, then turned, mounted his horse and was lost in the forest.

For the time being, this is all we have to tell you about the merchant and his son.

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A renowned and magnificent city, the capital of a mighty kingdom, was on the eve of a great holiday. From daybreak, all the citizens, from the merciful and mighty King down to the poorest

of labourers, were observing a fast, which could be broken at the advent of darkness, an hour when the human eye could not tell a black thread from a red one. To quench one's thirst, the Law permitted the rinsing of one's parched mouth with pure water. But awaiting all was a feast of numerous viands, sweets, fruit, wine and other delights of this earth.

There was in the land a cherished custom descending from hoary antiquity: poor people, orphans, lonely old men or wayfarers with no shelter for the night were invited to join families at the feast. This tradition was revered both in the sumptuous palaces of the wealthy and in the tumbledown huts of the poor.

As he went out of the house of prayer just before dusk, one of the city's most honoured and esteemed inhabitants addressed his friends about him as follows:

"O my friends, lend a merciful ear to my humble request and bring to my place all the poor you see in the streets and at coffee-houses. And the weaker, the more dejected and helpless they are, the greater the honours I shall receive them with."

The man's riches were boundless: his big caravans travelled the length and breadth of the land, as far as the upper reaches of the Great River; his numerous sailing ships swept the deep in many parts of the world; the beauty of his marble palaces, with their vast gardens and cool fountains, dazzled the eye. His wealth won him honours and veneration; and his kindly, truth-loving soul and wisdom won him universal affection. His alms for the poor never dwindled; never did he abandon an unfortunate friend in an hour of need, and his advice on most difficult matters was so far-sighted and valuable that even the King, the Shadow of the Prophet on earth, would hearken to it.

On hearing his request, his friends bowed to the ground, promising to fulfil it as soon as they could.

One of them added:

"O fountain of kindness, protector of the poor, and judge of jewels! Lend a condescending ear to what my servants told me upon coming from the bathhouse, which, as you know, every true believer is obliged to visit on this day of days.

"There was a man in the bathhouse, as aged, decrepit and destitute as has never been seen even in this rich city of ours, which abounds in beggars. Old sandals, a leather pouch and the rags on his back were all he had; nothing else.

"When the greybeard came back from the baths into the dressing-room, he saw that his beggarly pouch and his sandals had been stolen—as a practical joke, I think, rather than out of avarice—and only his threadbare clothing remained. All those present were outraged and compassionate, but their astonishment surpassed all other feelings when they saw that the old man's face, far from being contorted with grief and anger, was radiant with joy and gladness. He raised his hands and thanked Allah and Fate in words so exquisite, sincere and passionate that the onlookers fell silent in surprise and awe, and drew back from him. That was the man I wanted to tell you about, O giver of peace, though I confess that this strange old man seems mad to me."

The renowned and wealthy man shook his head and said:

"We do not know if he is a madman or a saint. Bring him to my house, O friend of mine, as soon you can, and he will be guest of honour at my repast."

And when the long-awaited moment came, and lights gleamed in every house in the capital, and the aroma of pilaff, fried fowl and spices from all the stoves in the city flooded through the night air, the old beggar was brought to the rich man's house. His host met him in the yard, took his arm respectfully, and supporting him, led him into the banquet hall, where he seated the venerable man at the head of the table and took all the dishes from the servants to serve the guest of honour with the best portion of every viand.

All present were delighted to see the radiant glow of loving-kindness on the old man's face, and the host, moved by his grey hair and his mild joy, asked him:

"Tell me, O my father, if I can humour you by fulfilling any wish of yours, whether great or small."

And the old man replied with a smile:

"Bring all your children, and your children's children here for me to bless them."

And the four grown-up sons of the famous merchant, and his three young grandsons approached him one by one, by seniority, and each knelt before him, between his feet, and the old man laid his hands on the head of each of them.

This ancient ritual over, the host asked the old man to bless him, too. The latter not only gave his blessing, but embraced him and kissed him on both cheeks and the mouth.

The famous merchant rose from his knees overcome with emotion and said:

"Forgive me, O my father, for the question I am going to ask you, and believe me, I am not driven by idle curiosity. From the moment you entered my home, I have been looking at you intently; and I cannot take my gaze off your face, which seems to me closer and more precious with every moment. Do you happen to remember, O my father, if you ever met me long, long ago?"

"I willingly forgive you, O my son," said the old man with a loving smile, "and I would ask you a question in my turn. Do you remember a shady grove on the banks of a rivulet, a mule and a bay mare, both tied to a tree, and two people in a round clearing—a father and his son, who emptied out their saddlebags full of precious stones and gold, and divided it all in two parts?"

And the merchant bowed to the ground before the old man, and kissed the earth between his feet, and exclaimed as he rose:

"O my beloved father, thank Allah the Almighty who has brought you hither. Look, here is your home, and here am I with my children, all your servants and slaves."

And they stood long embracing, and shedding tears of joy. All the rest were in tears too. When sweet calm was restored, the renowned merchant lovingly asked his father:

"Tell me now, O my father, why did you, that morn long ago, divide all we had and why did you wish us part for long, if not forever?"

And the elder replied:

"When we started out, unparalleled good luck was with us, if you remember. I kept repeating 'Inshallah' out of fear of envious Fate. And when we returned to that roadside inn and I found our bags untouched, exposed to all eyes and hands, I saw that this unique favour of Fate surpassed everything that had ever happened to a mortal, and that a long sequence of misfortunes and sorrows lay in store. To save you, my first-born, and all my household from the advance of woe, I decided to leave you, taking my inescapable fate with me, for it is said: 'tis only a man of folly who seeks refuge from a storm under a tree, which attracts the lightning... Behold the misery and destitution that have befallen me since our parting, and say if I was not sagacious in acting as I did then."

All his listeners bowed to the old man, awed at his wisdom and his great love for the family he had left.

And one of the oldest and most honourable guests asked him:

"Why then did you, O brother of my uncle, rejoice today instead of weeping, upon learning that your only possession, your beggar's pouch, had been stolen from you? Do not pay me with wrath for my tactless question, I implore you, but give me a reply, if you so please."

And the old man answered with a smile of kindness:

"I rejoiced because it dawned upon me at that very moment that Fate was tired of abusing me. For can one conceive of any

creature under the sun more luckless and destitute than a beggar whose pouch has been stolen! No greater misfortune could befall me. And lo! was I not right? Did I not find—and on that very same day—my son, and his sons, and the sons of his sons? And now I can live till the end of my days in love, joy and peace, without fear of calling my evil fate down on their heads.”

And they all bowed low to him once again and exclaimed in one voice:

*“Kismet!”*



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